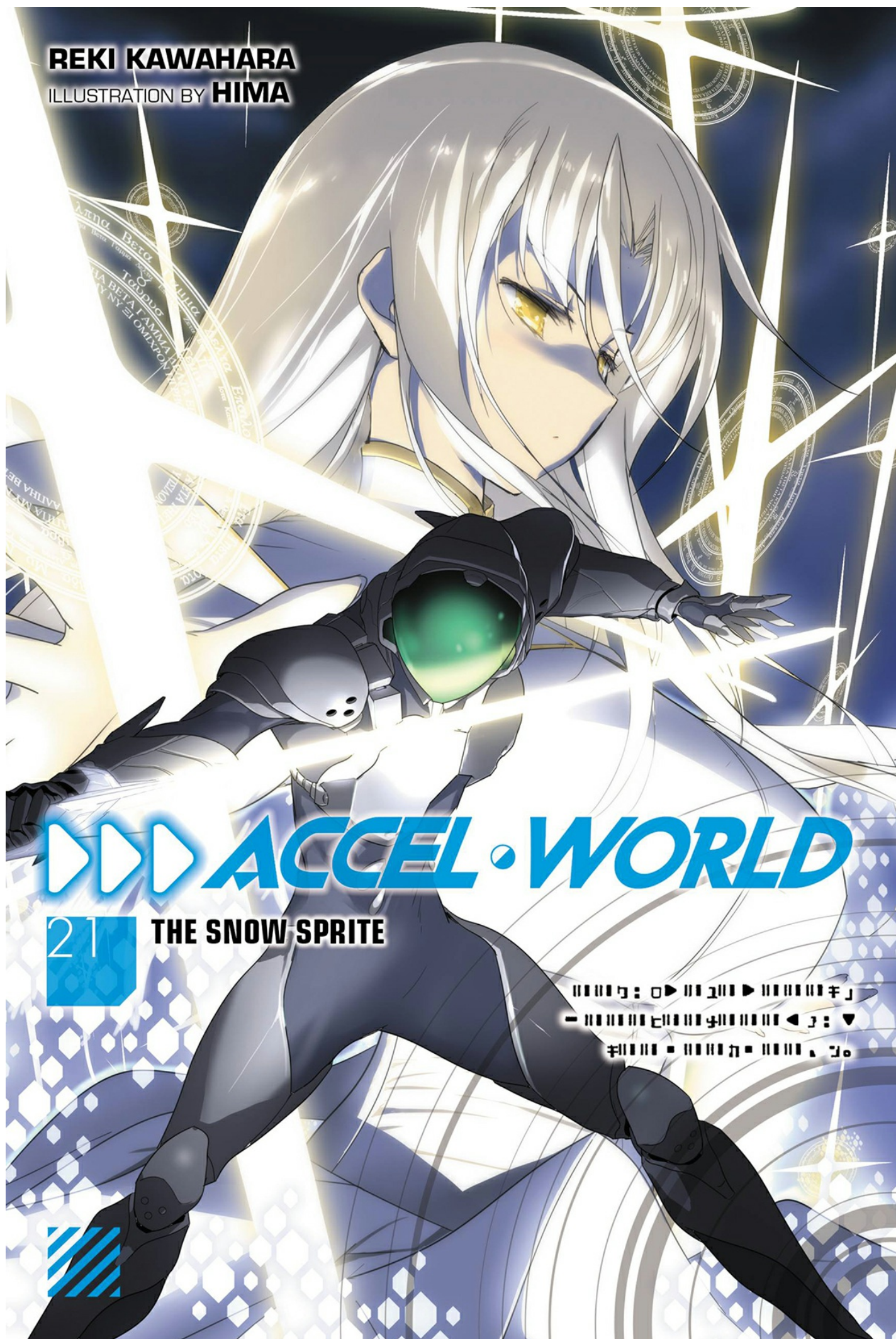


REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY **HIMA**



▶▶▶ ACCEL•WORLD

21

THE SNOW SPRITE

「ハルヒナ、お久しぶりです。久しぶりの再会、嬉しいです。」
「ハルヒナ、久しぶりです。久しぶりの再会、嬉しいです。」
「ハルヒナ、久しぶりです。久しぶりの再会、嬉しいです。」



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THE SNOW SPRITE

REKI KAWAHARA

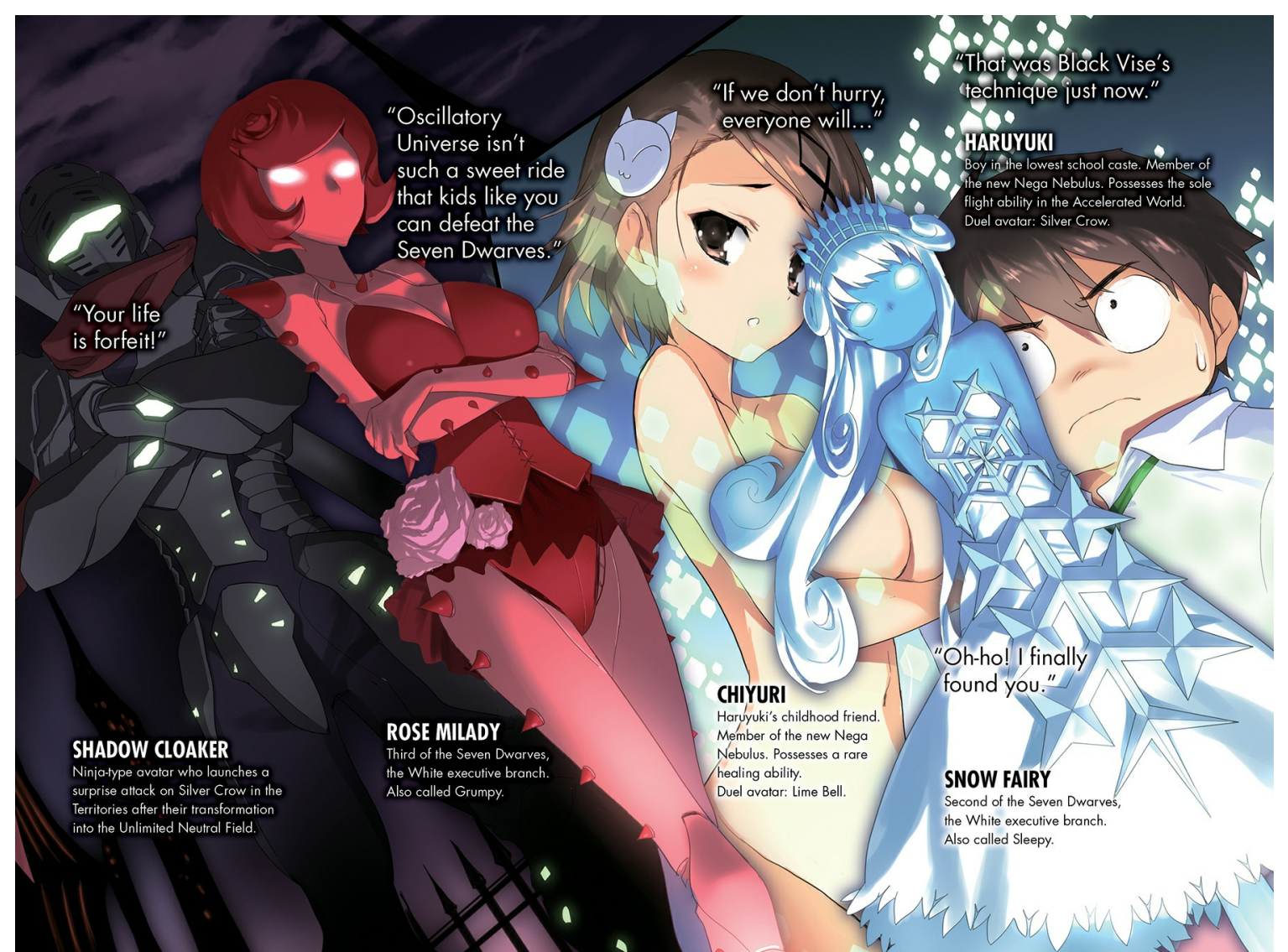
ILLUSTRATION BY

HIMA

DESIGN BY

bee-pee





"Oscillatory
Universe isn't
such a sweet ride
that kids like you
can defeat the
Seven Dwarves."

"If we don't hurry,
everyone will..."

"That was Black Vise's
technique just now."

HARUYUKI

Boy in the lowest school caste. Member of
the new Nega Nebulus. Possesses the sole
flight ability in the Accelerated World.
Duel avatar: Silver Crow.

"Your life
is forfeit!"

SHADOW CLOAKER

Ninja-type avatar who launches a
surprise attack on Silver Crow in the
Territories after their transformation
into the Unlimited Neutral Field.

ROSE MILADY

Third of the Seven Dwarves,
the White executive branch.
Also called Grumpy.

CHIYURI

Haruyuki's childhood friend.
Member of the new Nega
Nebulus. Possesses a rare
healing ability.
Duel avatar: Lime Bell.

"Oh-ho! I finally
found you."

SNOW FAIRY

Second of the Seven Dwarves,
the White executive branch.
Also called Sleepy.



"If I lose all my points, take care of the new Legion."

KUROYUKIHIME

Legion Master of the new Nega Nebulus. Vice president of the Umesato Junior High student council. Duel avatar: Black Lotus.

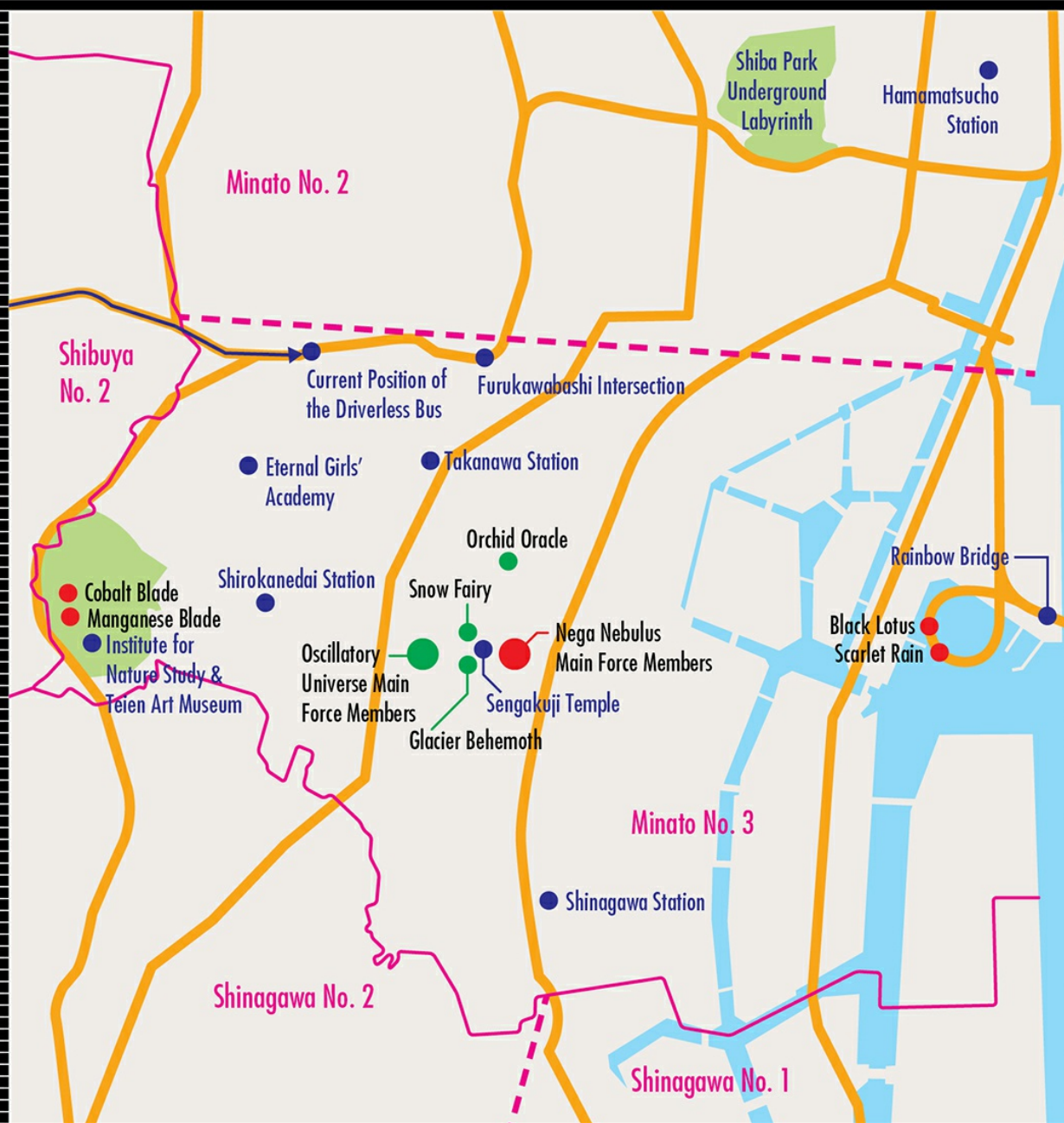
"Trisagion."

"Who's that girl there?"

NIKO

Red King, former Prominence Legion Master who joined the new Nega Nebulus. Duel avatar: Scarlet Rain.





Black Legion New Nega Nebulus

Black Lotus (provisional master)
Scarlet Rain (provisional deputy)

Four Elements

Sky Raker
Ardor Maiden
Aqua Current

Silver Crow
Cyan Pile
Lime Bell
Chocolat Puppeter
Mint Mitten
Plum Flipper
Magenta Scissor

Triplex

Blood Leopard
Cassis Moose
Thistle Porcupine

Ash Roller (temporary cooperation)
Bush Utan (temporary cooperation)
Olive Grab (temporary cooperation)
Trilead Tetroxide

White Legion Oscillatory Universe

White Cosmos

Seven Dwarves

???
Snow Fairy
Rose Milady
Ivory Tower
???
???
Glacier Behemoth
Shadow Cloaker

*Others

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THE SNOW SPRITE

Reki Kawahara
Illustrations: HIMA
Design: bee-pee



NEW YORK

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ACCEL WORLD, Volume 21

REKI KAWAHARA

Translation by Jocelyne Allen Cover art by HIMA

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■ Kuroyukihime = Umesato Junior High School student council vice president. Trim and clever girl who has it all. Her background is shrouded in mystery. Her in-school avatar is a spangle butterfly she programmed herself. Her duel avatar is the Black King, Black Lotus (level nine).

■ Haruyuki = Haruyuki Arita. Eighth grader at Umesato Junior High School. Bullied, on the pudgy side. He's good at games, but shy. His in-school avatar is a pink pig. His duel avatar is Silver Crow (level five).

■ Chiyuri = Chiyuri Kurashima. Haruyuki's childhood friend. Meddling, energetic girl. Her in-school avatar is a silver cat. Her duel avatar is Lime Bell (level four).

■ Takumu = Takumu Mayuzumi. A boy Haruyuki and Chiyuri have known since childhood. Good at kendo. His duel avatar is Cyan Pile (level five).

■ Fuko = Fuko Kurasaki. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules wind. Lived as a recluse due to certain circumstances but was persuaded by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki to come back to the battlefield. Taught Haruyuki about the Incarnate System. Her duel avatar is Sky Raker (level eight).

■ Uiui = Utai Shinomiya. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules fire. Fourth grader in the elementary division of Matsunogi Academy. Not only can she use the advanced curse removal command "Purify," she is also skilled at long-range attacks. Her duel avatar is Ardor Maiden (level seven).

■ Current = Formally known as Aqua Current. Real name: Akira Himi. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules water. Known as "The One," the bouncer who undertakes the protection of new Burst Linkers.

■ Graphite Edge = Real name: unknown. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Their identity is still wrapped in mystery.

■ Neurolinker = A portable Internet terminal that connects with the brain via a wireless quantum connection and enhances all five senses with images, sounds, and other stimuli.

■ Brain Burst = Neurolinker application sent to Haruyuki by Kuroyukihime.

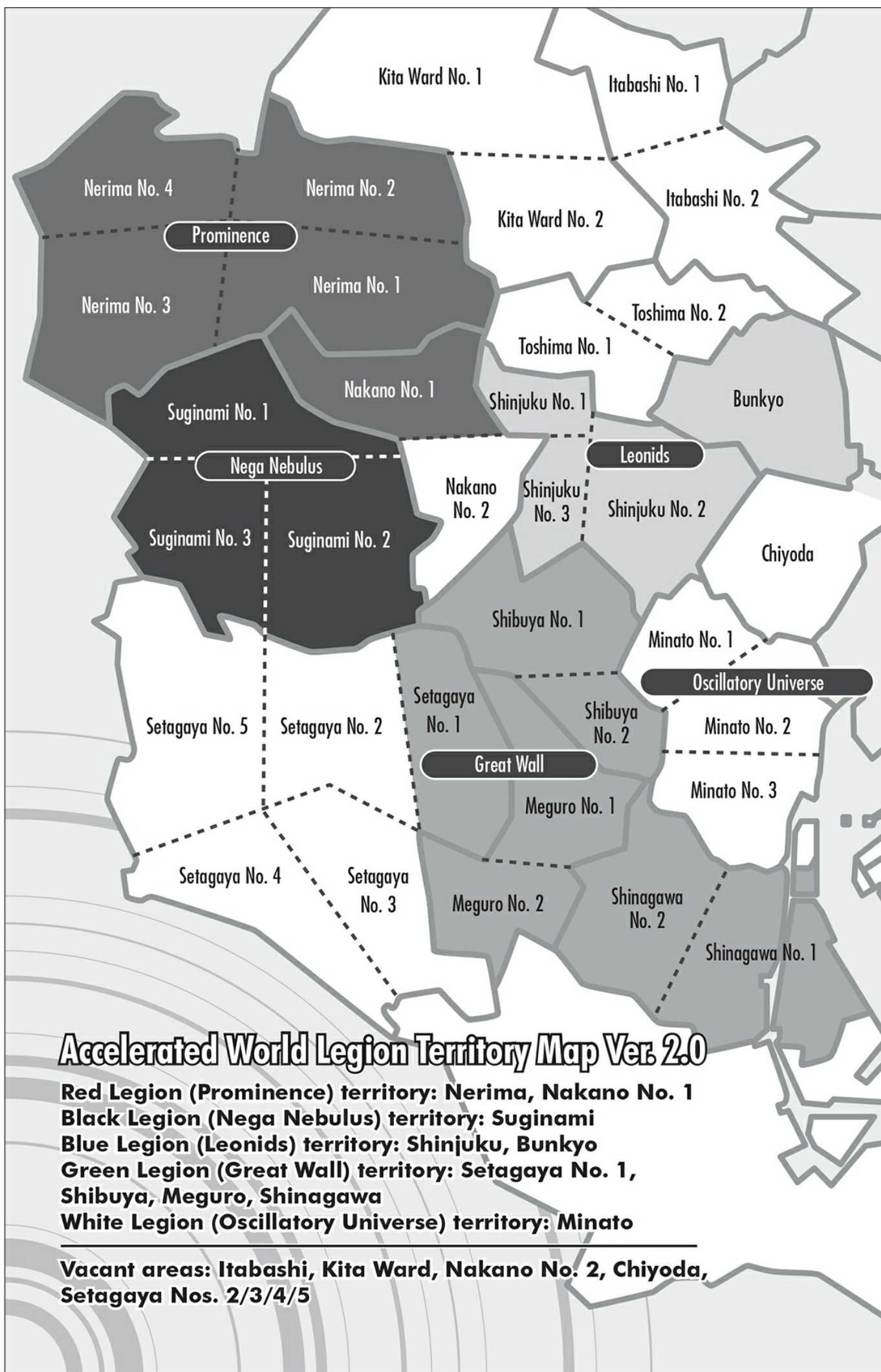
■ Duel avatar = Player's virtual self, operated when fighting in Brain Burst.

■ Legion = Groups composed of many duel avatars with the objective of expanding occupied areas and securing rights. There are seven main Legions, each led by one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color.

- Normal Duel Field = The field where normal Brain Burst battles (one-on-one) are carried out. Although the specs do possess elements of reality, the system is essentially on the level of an old-school fighting game.
 - Unlimited Neutral Field = Field for high-level players where only duel avatars at levels four and up are allowed. The game system is of a wholly different order than that of the Normal Duel Field, and the level of freedom in this field beats out even the next-generation VRMMO.
-

- Movement Control System = System in charge of avatar control. Normally, this system handles all avatar movement.
 - Image Control System = System in which the player creates a strong image in their mind to operate the avatar. The mechanism is very different from the normal Movement Control System, and very few players can use it. Key component of the Incarnate System.
 - Incarnate System = Technique allowing players to interfere with the Brain Burst program's Image Control System to bring about a reality outside of the game's framework. Also referred to as "overwriting" game phenomena.
-

- Acceleration Research Society = Mysterious Burst Linker group. They do not think of Brain Burst as a simple fighting game and are planning something. Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw are members.
- Armor of Catastrophe = An Enhanced Armament also called "Chrome Disaster." Equipped with this, an avatar can use powerful abilities such as Drain, which absorbs the HP of the enemy avatar, and Divination, which calculates enemy attacks in advance to evade them. However, the spirit of the wearer is polluted by Chrome Disaster, which comes to rule the wearer completely.
- Star Caster = The longsword carried by Chrome Disaster. Although it now has a sinister form, it was originally a famous and solemn sword that shone like a star, just as the name suggests.
- ISS kit = Abbreviation for "IS mode study kit." ("IS mode" is "Incarnate System mode.") The kit allows any duel avatar who uses it to make use of the Incarnate System. While using it, a red "eye" is attached to some part of the avatar, and a black aura overlay—the staple of Incarnate attacks—is emitted from the eye.



Accelerated World Legion Territory Map Ver. 2.0

Red Legion (Prominence) territory: Nerima, Nakano No. 1

Black Legion (Nega Nebulus) territory: Suginami

Blue Legion (Leonids) territory: Shinjuku, Bunkyo

Green Legion (Great Wall) territory: Setagaya No. 1, Shibuya, Meguro, Shinagawa

White Legion (Oscillatory Universe) territory: Minato

Vacant areas: Itabashi, Kita Ward, Nakano No. 2, Chiyoda, Setagaya Nos. 2/3/4/5

What was strength for a Burst Linker? The answer to this question, of course, depended on the person. If you took a thousand Burst Linkers, you would find a thousand kinds of strength.

The Black King had cutting power, the Red King, fire power, and the Green King, defensive power. Sky Raker had flight power. Blood Leopard had running power. Ardor Maiden had purification power. And while there were some with idiosyncratic powers such as Ash Roller's motorcycle power and Chocolat Puppeteer's chocolate power, every single Burst Linker worked and fought every day toward a strength that was theirs and theirs alone.

For Haruyuki, speed was his strength. His only focus for a period after he first became a Burst Linker was moving faster, flying faster. He believed he would be stronger if only he were faster. But from his fights with powerful enemies and friendly rivals, he had learned that speed came in different forms, too.

When it came to simple duel avatar movement speed, he could probably hold his own against Kuroyukihime and Pard, who were also fighting types. But he was under absolutely no delusion that he could beat either of them in close combat. In the do-or-die moment, both displayed extraordinary reaction speed. Even if Haruyuki glued himself to them, throwing punches with his full weight behind them, they could easily handle his attacks and hit him back with powerful counterattacks.

And then there was a kind of speed that was more big picture, fundamental. This was the speed of thought—instantaneous force and reaction speed. For all the high rankers Haruyuki knew well, no matter how unexpected the situation, they would never freeze in surprise for more than a fraction of an instant. Where Haruyuki would gape for a full three seconds, they were able to reassess the situation and take appropriate action immediately. Of course, this was partially due to the many long hours they had spent fighting in the Accelerated World, but more than anything, Haruyuki felt the difference was in their mental

readiness, an awareness that anything and everything could happen in Brain Burst and that if they didn't handle things right in the moment, it could bring about fatal results.

If Haruyuki had had that readiness and power of instantaneous thought, he might have been able to deal with Dusk Taker's special attack Demonic Commander the first time he'd seen it, managed to *not* be parasitized by the Armor of Catastrophe, and rescued Ardor Maiden from the Castle's Suzaku gate according to plan.

Looking back on it all, though, he could see that his many failures had turned into the seeds for his growth. But that was only because so many people had helped him, and he'd managed to solve those problems in the end. It was plenty possible for it to have all turned out in the worst way and for him to have never gotten the chance to learn from and move past his failures.

Which was exactly why Haruyuki had decided in his heart that the next time he was in an unexpected situation, no matter how surprising and how impossible the phenomenon confronting him, he wouldn't let the gears in his mind stop turning. He wouldn't stand there dumbfounded and wait for someone to give him instructions. He wanted to be the fastest; he needed to move instantly and do what had to be done.

And that "next time" was this moment.

“Paradigm Breakdown.”

From the roof of a distant building, a mysterious Burst Linker from the White Legion appeared and called this unfamiliar name. Pale-pink light rained down, and Haruyuki instinctively knew it as an Incarnate technique—not a simple special attack in-line with the game, but a supernatural power that twisted the Brain Burst system by overwriting it.

Suddenly, an impossible dawn came to the stage, and the timer vanished altogether, alongside every health gauge other than his own. There was only one place in the Accelerated World like that: the Unlimited Neutral Field. But this was the Territories, at best an expanded version of the Normal Duel Field.

The Incarnate technique had forcibly transformed the Territories stage into the Unlimited Neutral Field.

For Haruyuki and for the third Nega Nebulus formed from the merger with Prominence, the Territories battle that day—July 20, 2047—was one that absolutely had to be won. A victory would allow them to take control of Minato Area No. 3, the headquarters of the White Legion, Oscillatory Universe, and the other Legion would be then stripped of their right to block the matching list. If the names of Acceleration Research Society members appeared on the list as a result, they could prove that Oscillatory and the Society were flip sides of the same organization.

Until a few seconds earlier, Haruyuki had wanted to stand up and fight honorably, following the rules of Brain Burst and his pride as a Burst Linker. He had made the decision to obey Kuroyukihime’s teaching that Incarnate must only be used when the opponent attacked with it first. However, this shadowy Burst Linker had activated an Incarnate technique a mere ten minutes after the

start of the Territories. And there was no way that she was on Nega Nebulus's side.

Therefore, he could only assume it was the enemy—someone from Oscillatory Universe—and worse, anything was possible now that this person had used an Incarnate technique. If he didn't mobilize every scrap of power he had to respond, his Legion might even be so badly damaged they could never recover.

If you've got the time to stand here shocked, you've got the time to start moving!!

Haruyuki forcefully rebooted his numb mind and focused on responding to the situation before him. That said, however, he wasn't charging in recklessly or attacking the enemy. What he needed to do now was gather information. He didn't have the luxury of a leisurely stroll around the area, but there was one other way to investigate, and he was probably the only one on the battlefield with access to it.

He focused his mind and sent his thoughts flying. *"Please come, Metatron!!"* The instant the golden spindle and wings of the three-dimensional icon appeared before his eyes, he continued his prayer. *"Take me to the Highest Level!!"*

Skreeeeee!!

The sound of acceleration ripped through Haruyuki, and his mind alone was carried to a higher dimension.

An infinite empty space. Haruyuki tried to tune his mind to the one thing in the dark world where light, sound, and even the physical senses of his avatar did not exist: an infinitesimal dot before his eyes, blinking regularly. If his synchronization with this meager light was disturbed, his consciousness would be instantly repelled from this field. He still hadn't reached the level where he could freely come and go from the Highest Level, the ultimate, purest part of the Accelerated World.

But at the very least, he didn't have to panic anymore when he heard the sound of acceleration for the second time. Time was essentially stopped in this space; all he had to do was calm his mind and focus solely on the golden dot

blinking faintly.

Fwoom! The pinpoint opened up into countless fine lines that flowed off into the darkness to produce an elegant silhouette. A girl with a noble profile, clad in a thin dress, two wings extending from her back. Her eyes were closed, and the shining ring of light above her head generated a beautiful shadow.

The instant he touched the splendor released from the ring, golden particles also drew out from his own previously nonexistent body. He was half-relieved, half-apologetic that this was not his real-world self, but the form of Silver Crow.

Eyes still lowered, the girl—the fifteenth member of the third Nega Nebulus and Haruyuki's self-proclaimed master, Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron—purposefully raised a hand and brought her slender middle finger up against her thumb...

Plink!

...and then snapped them both against Haruyuki's helmet.

"Ow-ow-ow!"

Even Metatron, one pillar of the Four Saints, could not interfere physically in the Highest Level, so the impact and the pain were both illusions, but he nevertheless pressed a hand to his forehead reflexively.

"My servant! Silver Crow!" came the stern, scolding voice. "How dare you leave your master's side for such a lengthy period of time!"

"S-sorry. There was just a lot going on..."

"Well then, you will explain all of this 'a lot' in chronological order and great detail!"

"R-right. Um." Cocking his head to the side, he went back over his memories of the last few days. The last time he'd summoned Metatron had been the day before yesterday (Thursday evening), when he'd entered the Castle with Fuko. Inside, they'd encountered Trilead and his master/parent Graphite Edge, and the four of them had discussed the reason for the birth of Brain Burst and the conditions for clearing it.

Actually, he had met with Metatron one more time that day, in the middle of

the night. But he had been asleep in bed; *i.e.*, dreaming. So there was a good chance that he hadn't really met with her then. Either way, he decided to start his explanation at the merger meeting with Prominence.

But Metatron raised her hand once more, and instead of flicking his forehead this time, she touched Haruyuki's helmet with her palm. The slender hand slipped through his visor to touch the naked body of the avatar inside—and then further still to the inside of his mind itself.

Crack!

He felt something like a spark.

"...I see." Metatron removed her hand. "There was indeed 'a lot,' hmm?"

"H-huh?!"

You know from just that?!

He started to ask but then finally remembered: On the Highest Level, Metatron could reference Haruyuki's memories directly. So he figured the opposite was probably possible, too, and he started to reach his own hand out toward Metatron's head. But the Archangel's eyes abruptly flashed, so he hurriedly pulled back.

Metatron looked down on him with golden, half-open eyes. "In other words, although your battle with the White army began in the Low Level, you suddenly shifted to the Mean Level. Is that the situation?"

The Mean Level Metatron was referencing was the Unlimited Neutral Field, so he assumed that the Low Level was either the normal duel stage or the Territories stage. "Y-yeah. That's basically it. Although I don't really get that yet. Did we move from the Territories stage to the real Unlimited Neutral Field? Or did it just look and feel like it?" If it was the latter, then there would still be a way to deal with it.

"No." The Archangel shook her head crisply from side to side. "The coordinates where you and your comrades are located is the genuine Mean Level. The little warrior you saw probably moved you with your 'Incarnayte' System."

Haruyuki was speechless for a moment or two before he asked hoarsely, “I-is something like that even possible? There’s a level restriction on who can enter the Unlimited Neutral Field, and it also costs ten Burst Points.”

“Hmm.” Metatron turned and gently moved her left hand.

Faintly shining points of light appeared far below the infinite darkness. Their number increased as he watched until they were a colorful sea of twinkling stars. Lost for a moment in the complicated patterns traced out by the stars, Haruyuki realized it was the terrain of the Minato area. The place where countless stars came together and shone remarkably brightly was Shinagawa Station. The lines that stretched out above and below this were the Yamanote Line and the Tokaido Main Line. Immediately to the north of Shinagawa Station was Takanawa Station, and the west side of that was comparatively dark.

The stars they were looking at—*nodes*, to borrow Metatron’s wording—were social cameras in the real world, so there were naturally more of them at stations, in shopping districts, and along the main roads, and fewer at historic sites and parks. The darkness on the west side of Takanawa Station was Sengakuji Temple, the stronghold in the Territories stage. And where Haruyuki and his friends in Nega Nebulus were facing off against Glacier Behemoth and his companions on the Oscillatory Universe defending team.

Haruyuki’s subjective time was basically stopped at the moment, but the instant he returned from the Highest Level to the Unlimited Neutral Field, the battle would recommence. He had to gather as much information as possible before then. He narrowed his eyes at the Sengakuji area.

“There are traces of an abnormal space fluctuation in one part of the Mean Level,” Metatron murmured, sounding slightly more serious.

“Wh-what does that mean?”

“Come now. Look closely.” The Archangel pointed to a place a short distance from Sengakuji, the object of Haruyuki’s attention.

When he stared hard, he realized that the stars were flickering the tiniest amount, almost like a small wave rippling outward on black water. “What is that...flickering?”

“I’ve seen this same phenomenon just once before. When a large-scale interference occurs in the Mean Level, it leaves a tremor like that in the nodes. Most likely, that little warrior cut the space you occupied out of the Low Level and shifted it to the same coordinates in the Mean Level—or rather, caused it to be in sync.”

“S-so, like, cut and paste?” Haruyuki muttered, stunned, as he continued to gaze at the rippling stars.

He suddenly remembered the old games he always used to play back when he was in elementary school and didn’t yet know of the existence of Brain Burst. In one classic masterpiece of a puzzle-solving action game released nearly fifty years earlier, when the player used an item in a particular way before entering a warp zone, a bug would send them flying to a map they normally couldn’t access. The type and number of items corresponding to the map warped, too—in other words, the place itself might have been far away in the world of the game, but there was only a single digit’s difference in the program, a fact that had shocked young Haruyuki considerably.

Brain Burst 2039 was several million times—no, several tens of millions of times—the capacity of that old game, but its basic nature was the same. The Territories stage and the Unlimited Neutral Field seemed endlessly far apart, but the physical distance similarly held no meaning. Incarnate techniques could overwrite any phenomenon in the Accelerated World. So it was possible in principle to overwrite an address given on a certain map with that on a different map.

But how much imagination exactly—how much image power would be needed to do that? An Incarnate technique that interfered with the Accelerated World itself would have the ultimate range.

“Who could do this?” Haruyuki narrowed his eyes at the stars below, remembering the sweetly clear and yet somehow sad voice calling out “Paradigm Breakdown.”

In the Highest Level, it wasn’t only the nodes that mapped out the terrain that were visible, but also the Burst Linkers currently diving in the Unlimited Neutral Field. When he really focused his mind, a small silver light appeared in the

center of the darkness of Sengakuji Temple, a little toward the eastern side. Haruyuki instinctively understood that this was Silver Crow. While he savored the strange sensation of staring at his own self from the outside, his perception of the world grew broader.

The gray dot of light that appeared immediately to Crow's side was Ash Roller. A bright-green Bush Utan and a rich-green Olive Grab were also stuck to them. The group of three brown, purple, and pale-blue lights a little down to the south were Chocolat Puppeteer and the other members of Petit Paquet. And the large, shining, ice-blue dot that looked to be facing off against Haruyuki and his friends had to have been Glacier Behemoth—one of the Seven Dwarves, the White Legion's executive group. Only these eight were within the Sengakuji Temple grounds, but he could see several more points of light on the roofs of the office buildings on the east and west sides of the temple. He couldn't make out which light was who, but the high rankers of Nega Nebulus were camped out on the east side, while the west side was occupied by Oscillatory Universe.

And there was also a small light on the lone building standing tall and narrow to the north of Sengakuji. The pale pink with a hint of purple was the same color as the overlay that had enveloped the Territories stage like an aurora. This was without a doubt the Burst Linker who had activated the Incarnate technique at work, but in the Highest Level, he couldn't know her name or what she looked like, which was extremely frustrating.

"I have absolutely no way of knowing anything other than the location information from the current situation," Metatron said, as if reading his thoughts. "However, only those belonging to the army of the attacking or defending sides are permitted in the Low Level of your 'Territories stage,' so given that you do not know her, the little warrior in question would presumably be a member of Oscillatory Universe or whatever you called it."

"Right. I guess..." Although he bobbed his head in agreement, Haruyuki stopped it at an angle that was neither here nor there.

Immediately after the forced change from the Territories stage to the Unlimited Neutral Field, Glacier Behemoth had let slip some mysterious words.

King...Does this mean that now is that time?

Haruyuki had no idea what this really meant, but at the very least, Oscillatory executive member Behemoth had also been caught off guard by the progression of events. That's what it had felt like, anyway. But it could also have been taken to mean that he knew what this forced change was. So was the one who activated this Incarnate technique, Paradigm Breakdown, Behemoth's king—the head of Oscillatory Universe, the White King, White Cosmos? And was this light that flickered alone with an air of sadness on a building to the north the White King herself?

In his mind, Haruyuki compared the voice that called out the Incarnate technique name today with the voice of the White King when she'd presented herself in a dummy avatar on the day of the school festival the previous month to see if they were the same. He felt like they both had that sweet clarity. But he hadn't sensed even a hint of sadness in the White King's voice when she had barged into the Umesato local net. Even in that situation, she'd maintained an air of calmness—of *detachment*—and left without having revealed anything of her interior.

If they were different people, then there was no way Haruyuki would know the pale-peach duel avatar, likely a White Legion high ranker.

"Huh? But..." Furrowing his brow, he put his hazy hand to the side of his helmet. "That voice...I feel like I've heard it somewhere?"

"What are you talking about, Servant?" Metatron asked.

"The voice of the Burst Linker who dragged us into the Unlimited Neutral Field—I feel like I've heard it before," he replied, half on autopilot. "But where? ... Not at the meeting of the Seven Kings...Not at the merger meeting, either."

"Hmm. In that case, I shall search your memories."

"Yeah, okay— Wait, what?!" He started to bring his head forward obediently and then yanked it back in a hurry. "S-search? You can do that?!"

"We'll see. The memories of you little warriors and of us Beings are stored in a similar format, I assume? If I can expose them, we will be able to understand something." Her words deeply frightening, Metatron clamped her left hand onto Haruyuki's helmet. Even though her hand was much smaller and more slender than Silver Crow's, he was rendered unable to move his head at all.

“Eeaaah, h-help...”

Without so much as twitching an eyebrow at Haruyuki’s cry, Metatron stretched out the index and middle fingers of her right hand and was about to thrust them straight into his helmet. But then her entire body froze. Left hand still gripping his head, she whirled around.

“Who are you?!” she barked.

Haruyuki opened both eyes wide in amazement. This was the Highest Level, where time was basically stopped. The abyss of the Accelerated World that Haruyuki could only reach while linked with the Legend-class Enemy Metatron. There was no way anyone else could appear here, however strong they were.

Ping!

He heard a faint sound, like a fingertip popping off an extremely thin metal film.

Ping. Ping. Repeated at regular intervals, the sound grew louder bit by bit.

It was...footsteps? Haruyuki managed to pull free of Metatron’s hand somehow and then stared into the distant darkness.

At first, all he could see was a white shape, shimmering hazily. As it approached, it took on human form. Just like Haruyuki and Metatron, it was an outline of faint light, a small F-type duel avatar. She only came up to Silver Crow’s chest, with a surprisingly small torso and limbs, and her whole body was wrapped in dress-type armor with a geometric pattern reminiscent of snowflakes. The girl stopped immediately before Haruyuki and Metatron, her sweet face mask brightening into a smile.

“Oh-ho! I finally found you.”

“...Wh-who are you?” he stammered.

“It’s polite to give your own name before you ask someone else’s. I’d like to say that at least, but I know your name, so I’ll make a special exception and tell you. I’m Snow Fairy, also known as Sleepy.” The girl’s voice was sweet and sour. “Nice to meet you, Silver Crow.”

The instant he heard the cutesy name, Haruyuki forgot he was in the Highest

Level where physical interference was not possible and took a step back into a ready position.

And that was because this name had been given a fairly high number on the list of Oscillatory Universe members Kuroyukihime had shared.

She was a member of the executive group, the Seven Dwarves. Glacier Behemoth, the powerful enemy he'd fought earlier, was seventh among their ranks.

Snow Fairy was number two.

With regard to the order of the list, Kuroyukihime had said, "It's not that they're simply in order of strongest. If I had to say, it's in order of who is the most villainous." In other words, the avatar before his eyes was one of the uber-villains among the White Legion.

"H-how did you get here?" Haruyuki asked immediately.

Snow Fairy grinned once more. "I felt like someone was watching me somehow. It's scary, so I don't really like to come here. But I like being spied on even less."

"Like someone was watching you?" Haruyuki repeated, dumbfounded.

If he were to believe what she'd just said, the girl avatar grinning before his eyes had sensed Haruyuki's gaze as he observed the Unlimited Neutral Field from the Highest Level. He absolutely could not believe that that was possible. In his understanding, observers on the Highest Level were like the gallery watching an old-style online game through a monitor. What kind of dueler could notice the presence of a third party in the distant network?

Haruyuki might have been training his powers of instantaneous thought, but now he froze in his ready position, not knowing how he should respond to the situation.

Meanwhile, Snow Fairy turned her gaze to Metatron next to him, and her smile faded just a little. "I wonder why you two are so unreasonable...If you're an Enemy, then you should just be an Enemy and satisfy yourself bullying Burst Linkers. It's because you're here like this that there's weird interference." She stopped for just an instant before shrugging lightly. "Well, whatever. We're

never going to meet again, anyway.”

She took a step toward Metatron, who had maintained an uncharacteristic silence, and casually raised one hand. Her fingers—so surprisingly slender that it seemed impossible she was a fighting-game avatar—moved as though pinching something.

Metatron reacted instantly. She remained motionless, but the ring above her head flashed, and Fairy took a step back as though repelled by an invisible impact.

Haruyuki couldn't begin to imagine what was taking place between the two of them, when interaction was impossible in the Highest Level. But then he suddenly felt as though the floor had dropped out from beneath his feet, and he cried out unconsciously. “Unh...Aah?!”



Reflexively, he tried to hover with the wings on his back, but that had no effect. Whatever was happening, though, it seemed that Metatron was doing it and that it was not an attack by Fairy. Standing alongside the still-silent Archangel, he plummeted into the darkness.

The pixie avatar shrugged slightly, growing distant in the blink of an eye. “Aw, too bad...”

As this faint voice reached him, a wave of noise enveloped him like the Brain Burst acceleration sound played backward, and the world faded to white.

Haruyuki staggered slightly when he returned to the Unlimited Neutral Field. He managed to brace himself and then look first at his left shoulder. After confirming that Metatron's 3-D icon was indeed sitting there, he let out the breath he'd been holding. In terms of physical sensation, he felt like he'd been in the Highest Level for more than five minutes, but in reality, not even a second had passed. Next to him, Ash Roller, Bush Utan, and Olive Grab were looking around, stunned, searching for the missing stronghold.

"I won't let that Snowflake or whatever it was get away with this." Metatron's voice was unprecedentedly thorny.

"Huh?" Haruyuki flinched and pulled his head in. "Th-that thing back there? What did she try to do?"

"She tried to sever the link between you and me, the link that I have gone to great lengths to strengthen."

"Sever...But I thought you couldn't interfere with other people on the Highest Level?"

"That is true as a general rule. However—"

"Oy, you damned crow!" Ash Roller turned around and yelled, straddling his bike, perhaps noticing their voices in conversation. "What the heck did they...?"

Even the fin-de-siècle rider couldn't hide his confusion, and the Petit Paquet group, Sky Raker, and the others to the rear were in the same boat. But the Oscillatory side had to have had a firmer grasp on the situation, so Nega Nebulus risked them taking the first attack if they charged their front line now.

Haruyuki decided that he first needed to get his team back on their feet and ready to fight. "Ash, we have to pull back for now!" he called toward Ash Roller

and his gang. “This is the *actual* Unlimited Neutral Field! If we die, we could end up in an Unlimited—” The words that leapt unbidden from his mouth were fed back into his thoughts after a very slight time delay, sending a powerful chill racing through his entire body.

Unlimited EK.

When an immediate burst out was not possible in the Unlimited Neutral Field, and a player died inside the territory of a powerful enemy, they were then attacked and immediately killed by that same enemy an hour later when they automatically regenerated. Unlimited EK was this process repeated over and over until the player lost all their Burst Points. To avoid this fate, common sense motivated players to set an automatic disconnect timer with a global connection when diving into the Unlimited Neutral Field.

But what if there was a Burst Linker with attack power on par with a Legend-class Enemy? Even without playing a sudden-death card, such a player could push another Burst Linker to total point loss just like in an Unlimited EK. Not an Enemy Kill, but an Unlimited Player Kill.

That was the whole point then. If the Oscillatory camp had brought about this forced change, then that had to have been their aim. The complete elimination of Nega Nebulus, which had repeatedly checked the plans of the Acceleration Research Society and the White King.

A powerful shiver of fear numbing his avatar’s limbs, Haruyuki prepared to once again urge Ash and the others to retreat temporarily. But before he could, he heard a voice calling out to him from the rear.

“Corvus, are you serious?!”

Quickly turning around, he saw Sky Raker racing toward him, her white dress fluttering. Behind her were Ardor Maiden, Aqua Current, and the other members of the attack team. Seeing them run in, Chocolat and her friends also came running their way after their temporary retreat to the south.

Reflexively, Haruyuki counted his comrades. Three of the Four Elements, Nega Nebulus’s executive. Beside them was the Triplex, the former Prominence executive of Blood Leopard, Cassis Moose, and Thistle Porcupine. To the rear, Cyan Pile, Lime Bell, and Magenta Scissor were clustered together. Adding in

Ash and the other two on his American motorcycle; Chocolat Puppeteer and her friends; Haruyuki; and Metatron made a total of seventeen. Only *he*, their secret weapon, wasn't there, but that was all according to the plan.

Since everyone on their attack team had been able to join the battle, that meant that the White Legion had placed the maximum of nearly twenty people in Minato Area No. 3 in anticipation of their attack. It was only natural that they would put an emphasis on protecting the area with their headquarters, but the issue was why they had included several of the Seven Dwarves on the defense team.

Bemoaning the fact that his investigation on the Highest Level had ended so abruptly, Haruyuki explained the situation to Sky Raker. "Master, we've been moved to the *real* Unlimited Neutral Field. The White Legion is probably aiming to—"

"Servant!" Metatron cut him off. "There!" The 3-D icon's small wing pointed. Following it, he turned his head back up to the sky approaching dawn.

Countless white objects were dancing down from the rich-purple clouds, lightly, softly. When he caught one in his open palm, it immediately melted into water and then instantly evaporated. He didn't feel any cold, but no matter how he looked at it, this was...

"Snow?" he murmured.

"There aren't supposed to be any weather effects in the Demon City stage." Naturally, it was Takumu who responded. "Well, though, given the abnormal situation, I can't say anything with certainty."

"What is this nonsense you speak?!" The 3-D icon flapped her thin wings. "This is the Mean Level overdrive phenomenon. It's due to the power that you all call Incarnayte!"

"What?!" At a loss for words, Haruyuki looked up at the dark sky once more.

The pure-white snow was not just falling quietly from the sky above Sengakuji, but it enveloped the entire center of Minato Area No. 3 at least. There were indeed ranged Incarnate techniques, but he had never seen nor heard of a technique with such a wide-ranging effect.

Who on earth and to what end...? He followed the drifting snow with his eyes. And there he found a crouching, silent figure.

It was the White Legion's powerful warrior Glacier Behemoth, aka Sneezy. Haruyuki had been fiercely engaged with him until just before the stage had been manipulated. Just as his name would indicate, Behemoth made liberal use of his powerful freezing techniques to push the three members of the Petit Paquet group to the line between life and death and tortured Haruyuki when he raced in as backup. So was this snowfall his Incarnate?

Haruyuki stared at the massive form encamped some twenty meters away, gripping his Enhanced Armament, Lucid Blade, in his right hand.

Behemoth had been completely silent since murmuring *"King...Does this mean that now is that time?"* right after the forced shift. The way the enormous avatar was pulled into himself, head hanging, it was almost as though he were afraid of something. Or—this couldn't possibly have been it, but—

He almost looked as if he was *apologizing* to Haruyuki and his comrades.

In the midst of the gradually intensifying snow, Sky Raker spoke in a low, strained voice. "The situation is too unclear. I'm sorry, but we have to stop the mission for the time being and go back to the real world. The nearest portal is..."

"Shinagawa Station," Cassis Moose noted. "If this is the real Unlimited Neutral Field, that is."

"There's no doubt about that," Haruyuki said.

Fuko nodded lightly. She turned to Utai, who was standing at her side. "Maiden. Give the retreat signal."

"That's a roger." Ardor Maiden turned her longbow toward the snowy sky. Just as Glacier Behemoth had called his comrades to him with a light beam technique, the Nega Nebulus troops had decided in advance on all kinds of signals from Maiden's flaming arrows. Although the majority of the team was gathered together there, they had to let *him*, standing by to the rear, know about the retreat as well.

She pulled back the longbow string, and even when the bow generated an

arrow of flames, Behemoth didn't move. The Oscillatory Burst Linkers encamped on the roofs of the buildings to the rear also showed no signs of approaching. The Incarnate snow simply continued to fall silently on the battlefield.

Bowstring fully drawn, Utai released her hand after a moment of stillness. The arrow wreathed in crimson flames flew upward. But when it was barely ten meters up in the sky, its glimmer abruptly faded and vanished as though the arrow had burned itself up.

"What?!" Utai let out a small cry. Ardor Maiden's longbow, Flame Caller, was a superior Enhanced Armament, and it had a range on par with a rifle when the bowstring was pulled all the way back. The arrow should have easily reached the low-hanging clouds and produced a light visible from anywhere in the area, but now this was no signal at all.

She moved to pull the bowstring back once more, but then her hand froze. She quickly turned her whole small body to the west. Haruyuki had sensed it, too, now. An extremely powerful pressure, enough to shake his avatar to the core. Before he could discern the source, he heard a voice.

"Any flame's gonna flicker out in *my* snow."

He'd heard this lisping, sweet young girl's voice before.

"Top of Behemoth," Blood Leopard with her keen eyesight muttered briefly.

Taking her lead, he narrowed his eyes to peer beyond the falling snow. There was a small human figure on top of the head of the crouching beast who had lost one of his horns; the figure had probably moved there cloaked by the snow and the moonless dawn. He couldn't make out the details, but there was no mistaking the silhouette of that armor with the snowflake motif. It was the Seven Dwarves' number two, the one who had chased Haruyuki and Metatron to the Highest Level and tried to sever their link: Snow Fairy.

So did that mean that it was *her* Incarnate snow? If it was powerful enough to snuff out Maiden's flame arrow, then it was truly a terrifyingly powerful technique. But for all that, not only did it not do any damage, he didn't even feel any cold, so what was—?

“Crap,” Aqua Current murmured hoarsely as she flicked the fingers of a hand covered in flowing water armor to send droplets of water scattering ahead of her. Like the flame arrow, the shimmering droplets froze instantly a mere ten meters in front of her and fell to the ground like glass beads. “We’re surrounded by a super-low-temperature field.”

“Huh? S-so then is it just that it’s not cold here?” Haruyuki’s voice was tense, and Sky Raker nodded without a word. He hurriedly surveyed his surroundings again and realized that the snow was falling perpendicularly within a space of about twenty meters around the party only; just beyond that, it was swirling violently. He had no doubt that the second they stepped into that maelstrom, they would be assaulted by a fierce cold and take serious damage.

“You can’t leave that area now,” came Snow Fairy’s childish voice once more. The falling snow gradually grew thicker, and before he knew it, the buildings on all sides were basically invisible.

“We could do a power charge and retreat to the portal,” Sky Raker murmured, perhaps judging that the situation would only get worse if they didn’t act soon.

Ash Roller lightly revved his motorcycle’s engine. “I’ve been waiting for that, Master. You let us take the lead.” Seated behind Ash, Utan and Olive bobbed their heads.

Fuko gave them a nod in return. “Please do, Ash. When I deploy the defensive wall, take that as a signal and ride south. I’ll cover everyone else, and we’ll run after the motorcycle. All right?”

Everyone else nodded in unison.

This exchange was all in whispers and quiet voices, so being twenty meters away, Snow Fairy couldn’t possibly have heard it. But from the other side of the curtain of dancing snowflakes, Haruyuki felt like he could hear a faint giggling, and he clenched his fists before returning Lucid Blade to the sheath hanging on his hip and readying himself for the signal to charge.

In the center of the party, Fuko slowly brought her hand up and shouted, “Wind Veil!!”

A brilliant-green overlay jetted from the palm of her hand. This instantly transformed into a whirlwind and expanded, knocking away the snow until they were all wrapped in the wind barrier. Fuko's Incarnate defensive wall had once protected them from even the fourth quadrant Incarnate technique Rust Order, which the Acceleration Research Society's Rust Jigsaw had activated, and now it pushed back the vague fear and anxiety Haruyuki had been feeling to give him new energy.

The rear tire of Ash Roller's motorcycle spun ferociously. The instant the tread bit into the cobblestones, the three-seater American motorcycle dashed ahead furiously. The remaining fourteen members also shoved off the ground and started to run.

A hundred meters to Sengakuji Temple's south gate. From there, depending on the route, it was about a kilometer to Shinagawa Station where the portal was. If they ran at top speed, they could cover the distance in a few minutes. In a formation with the three low-health Petit Paquet members and their depleted health gauges in the center, the team charged into the extremely low temperate space where the Incarnate snowstorm was twisting a blinding white.

Or at least they were about to.

"Last Glacial Period." The weighty technique name chased up from behind and slipped ahead of them.

Krrrrrr! An incredible roar shook the stage, and something suddenly rose up from the ground around them, blue and clear. *Ice*. Thick ice pillars popped up to form a circular wall.

"S'noooo!" Ash Roller put on the brakes. Sparks flying from the front rotor, the machine decelerated, but it didn't look anywhere close to stopping.

"Got it!"

"On it!"

Cyan Pile and Cassis Moose cried at the same time and came out in front of the motorcycle from either side. Pile attacked the ice wall with his Pile Driver and Moose with the massive horns on his head. The iron pile and the spiked horns slammed into the ice wall at exactly the same moment, and then the two

largest avatars on the attacking team stopped in their tracks. Unable to completely absorb the energy they generated, they were thrown backward.

“Unh!”

“Nngh!”

Pile and Moose fell to the ground, and a second later, Ash’s motorcycle also crashed into the ice wall from the side. The three riding it managed to avoid fatal injury by kicking off the wall with their feet, but the mirror flew off, and the muffler bent in half.

Haruyuki immediately deployed the wings on his back to slow himself down, catching Raker and the others running up from behind him as he cried out, dumbfounded, “It’s...not even scratched?!”

The ice wall had been hit with the full attack power of both avatars, but he couldn’t see even a scratch, much less a crack in the wall that shone slick in the faint-purple light of the dawn from the east. The wall was a prison ten meters around and even taller than that, completely locking away the seventeen Burst Linkers.

“This ice was also produced with Incarnayte,” Metatron muttered from his left shoulder.

Haruyuki reflexively looked back and caught sight of a dark shadow still crouching on the other side of the thick ice. The technique call he’d heard before had to have been Glacier Behemoth’s. When he’d fought Haruyuki, he’d insisted on a clean fight. There had been no surprise attacks, no helping hands, no challenges or jeers. And now he had launched the first strike with an Incarnate attack, the ultimate taboo for Burst Linkers.

It had been Incarnate power that had forcibly moved them to the Unlimited Neutral Field, and if the Oscillatory side’s intention was to get Nega Nebulus in an Unlimited PK, then obviously they were prepared to do whatever it took right from the start, but even so, Haruyuki couldn’t stop himself from shouting.

“Behemoth!!”

Did his voice make it through Fuko’s defensive barrier and the wall of ice to reach him? The massive creature stirred for the first time since their forced

move to a new playing field, then slowly stood, Snow Fairy still riding on his head, his sharp eye lenses glittering palely.

“For the sake of our great cause,” Behemoth announced in his gravelly voice, which felt like it went straight into Haruyuki’s psyche. “And for the sake of all Burst Linkers...You’ll have to be erased here.”

“Y-your ‘great cause’? For the sake of Burst Linkers?” Haruyuki’s voice was hoarse, as if he was squeezing it out from the depths of his body. “Are you saying...what you’ve done was just?”

“You all must have realized it by now, too, actually.” It was Snow Fairy who responded, from her perch atop Behemoth’s head. “There’s a far, far more cruel curse on this world than the Armor of Catastrophe, than even the ISS kits.” The arms she stretched out toward the sky seemed far too slim to be part of a fighting game. Her slender silhouette was enveloped in a crisp, bright light. “We will set you free...from this curse that binds you.”

Her overlay spread out, shaking the air, and the falling snow turned into particles of light with no heat. “Brinicle.”

The surrounding snow started to spin violently, glittering all the while. Behemoth and Snow Fairy and the entire Sengakuji area were swallowed up in a white light and disappeared. Haruyuki instinctively dropped into a fighting stance, but the pale snowstorm simply raged on the other side of Behemoth’s ice wall.

Was this another entrapment-type technique to check the movement of the seventeen avatars? In that case, maybe they should smash the ice wall now while they had the chance.

With this thought in mind, Haruyuki stretched out the fingers of his right hand to activate his Incarnate technique Laser Sword. But before he could focus his imagination, the 3-D icon on his shoulder called out sharply.

“Servant! Above!”

Together with his immediate neighbors, who’d also heard the tiny voice, Haruyuki turned his head to the dawn sky. The rest of the group soon followed suit. A funnel-shaped white cloud was descending slowly.

It was shuddering, a whirlwind spinning at incredibly high speeds—an ice tornado.

Was this tornado the true form of Snow Fairy's Incarnate technique Brinicle? If so, it was painfully slow for an attack technique. The tornado stretched out at a speed of about one second per meter—in other words, the tip that was currently thirty meters above them would take about thirty seconds to reach the ground where Haruyuki and his friends stood.

There wasn't a Burst Linker alive who would stand by helplessly to be hit with this technique if Fairy had activated it on its own, meaning the technique required that its target first be restrained through some other means. An attack in which speed was completely abandoned for the sake of some other power...

"This is bad..." Thistle Porcupine's hoarse voice backed up Haruyuki's thinking. The fluffy fur on her back stood on end, perhaps because of her extreme tension. "That Incarnate technique's prob'ly the type that's all attack power; get hit, and you die. If you can't dodge or defend, you're in big trouble."

"Anyone who can use a defensive-type Incarnate technique, get ready to defend!" Team leader Fuko responded quickly. "Anyone who can use physical or fire types, smash this wall!"

"R-roger!!" Haruyuki shouted back immediately, and now he really did focus his awareness in his right hand. To one side, Takumu grabbed the tip of the pile poking out of his Enhanced Armament with his left hand, while beside him, Akira crossed both arms in front of her.

"Cyan Blade!!"

"Phase Trans! Keen!"

The two blue types shouted their technique names simultaneously, causing a gush of overlay in different shades of blue. Cyan Pile's Pile Driver transformed into a great two-handed sword, Aqua Current's flowing armor into frozen armor and a katar shield.

Ash Roller, who hadn't learned any Incarnate techniques as a matter of general principle; Bush Utan and Olive Grab, who had kept their distance from anything bearing the Incarnate name since they were freed of the ISS kits; the

Petit Paquet group, who had only just learned of the existence of the Incarnate System from Fuko and the others; and Lime Bell, who hadn't fully mastered an Incarnate technique yet, were put in the center of the circle, and the remaining members of the group positioned themselves to activate their individual Incarnate techniques.

The defenders were Sky Raker, who had already activated her Wind Veil; Ardor Maiden, who turned her longbow into a handheld fan; and Cassis Moose, who had a purple overlay in his massive horns. The attackers were Silver Crow, together with Cyan Pile; Aqua Current; Blood Leopard, who had grown the claws on her hands to a great length; Magenta Scissor, with large knives ready on her hips; and Thistle Porcupine, who had changed the fur on her back into sharp needles.

It took ten seconds for them all to make their preparations after Fuko's shouted instructions, and the tip of the white tornado had already dropped down to fifteen meters above them.

Fifteen seconds left. For Burst Linkers with focus pushed to their actual limits, this was definitely not a short time period.

"We move together!" Fuko shouted.

Haruyuki turned toward the ice wall at the same time as Takumu and the others and dropped into position. Behind him, Fuko, Utai, and Cassis brandished hands toward the tornado.

"Three, two, one, zero!!"

Haruyuki swung his right hand. "Laser...Sword!!" He'd focused his imagination around the singular resolve of smashing the wall, and now it produced a sword of light.

Takumu and Akira brandished their steel greatsword and icy dagger, too.

"Aaaaah!!" A battle cry ripping out of his throat, Haruyuki moved to pierce the thick ice wall Glacier Behemoth had created.

In that instant, in the corner of his eye, someone who had not been there a mere second earlier popped into existence. It wasn't exactly a sudden appearance, though. Haruyuki felt more like it was just that he'd finally now

noticed someone who'd been there right from the start.

The time between Haruyuki activating his Incarnate technique and the sword coming into contact with the ice wall had to have been at best 0.2 or 0.3 seconds. But in that brief instant, he saw someone appear, put up a hand, and activate an Incarnate technique in a wan voice.

“Imaginary Time.”

The technique generated absolutely no light, no sound, not even a vibration. Haruyuki's health gauge didn't drop so much as a pixel. The Incarnate sword in his right arm simply vanished.

To his side, the two-handed sword that Takumu had been about to bring down also disappeared, and on his other side, the ice armor covering Akira's body melted. Fuko's Incarnate defensive wall that had enveloped them all was also gone.

Dumbfounded, Haruyuki was unable to pull out of the blow he was in the middle of dealing, the force of his entire body and soul behind it, and his striking hand crashed into the wall. Naturally, not only was the wall not smashed, it wasn't even scratched, and the armor of his own fingers creaked as a sharp pain overtook him.

But he barely even registered this.

An Incarnate technique to *cancel other Incarnate techniques*. He couldn't believe something like that even existed, but that was the only explanation he could come up with.

“Wha—?!” Takumu cried.

“Impossible!” Akira muttered.

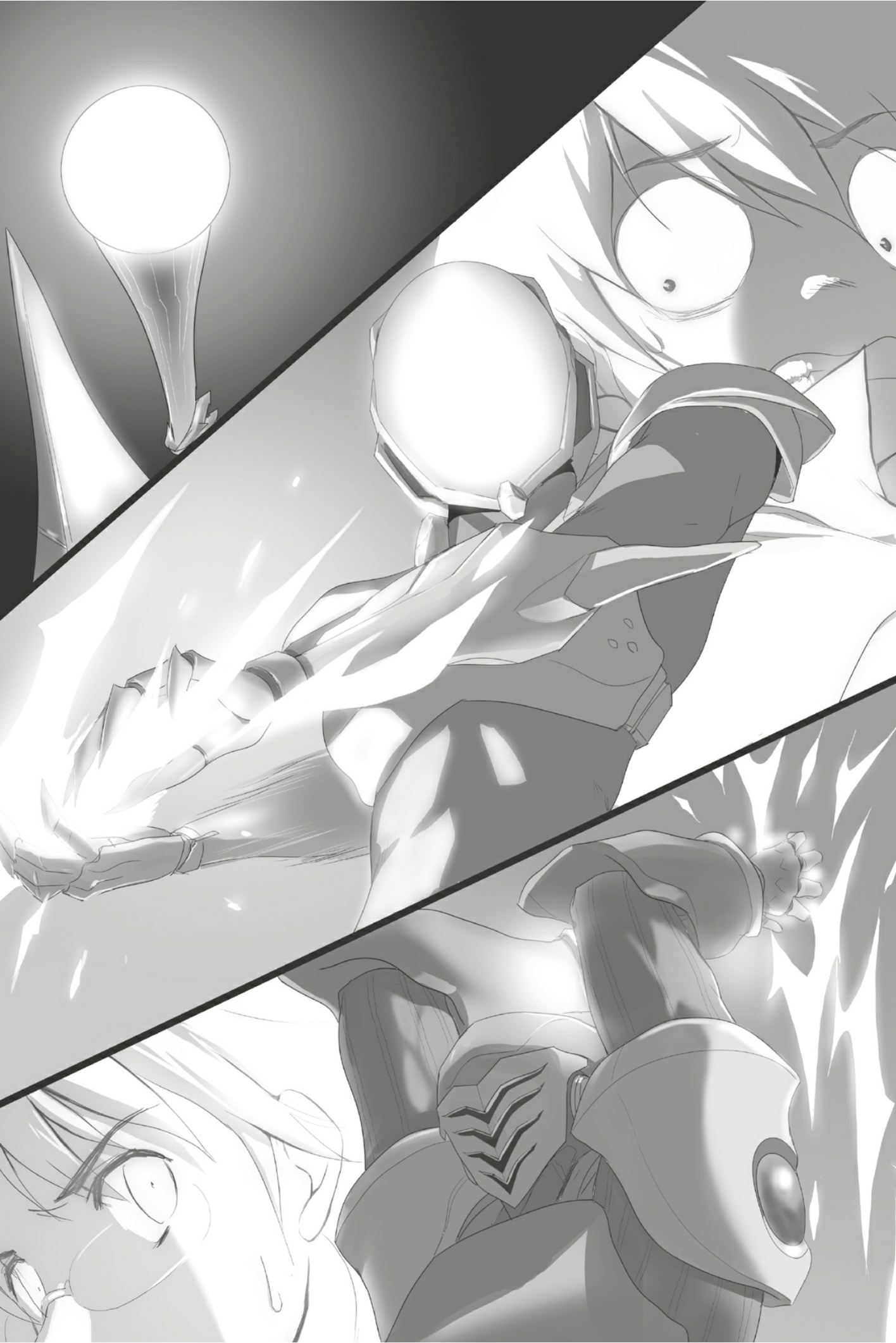
Haruyuki turned to the left and looked directly at the duel avatar who had abruptly appeared.

A tall, slender silhouette like a tapered stick. Face mask with neither nose nor mouth. The armor covering his body was a pale, shiny porcelain-like ivory. One of the Seven Dwarves, the full proxy for the White King, Ivory Tower.

Haruyuki had only ever seen him at the meetings of the Seven Kings; he'd

never fought him nor even seen him on the battlefield. His shock at someone like this suddenly showing up and exhibiting a terrifyingly powerful technique—one that could wipe out the Incarnate of nine people in an instant—quickly changed to fear.

They couldn't move from where they stood unless they destroyed the ice prison locking them away—Glacier Behemoth's Last Glacial Period. Snow Fairy's Brinicle was closing in from the sky above, sure to do massive damage if it swallowed them up. The tip of the tornado had already reached the space directly above the heads of the party, and they had six—no, five seconds until it touched down.



“Corvus!!” The first to pick herself up from the shock and fear and break the momentary standstill was Fuko.

““Run!!”” she and Metatron both shouted to him at the same time.

And indeed, in this situation, the only one who could get over the 10-meter ice wall and escape was the winged Silver Crow. But he could never abandon his precious comrades just to save himself. But he brushed away this instant of hesitation. Fuko wasn’t ordering him to run for sentimental reasons. If just one of them could escape, they would still have a chance to turn the situation around. In the worst-case scenario, the attacking team could be annihilated on that very spot, and they had to avoid that at all costs.

“Okay!!” he shouted, his voice cracking with heartbreak, and spread the wings on his back.

Three seconds until the lethal tornado touched down.

Just one of them, at least. Haruyuki made an instantaneous decision about the lightest avatar closest to him and stretched his arms out as far as they would go. “Bell!!”

Two seconds left.

Lime Bell reflexively offered her own hands at Haruyuki’s call. He kicked off the ground, and clutching those hands, he vibrated the wings on his back with all his might.

One second.

Hanging onto Chiyuri tightly with both arms, Haruyuki lifted off, while behind him, a spinning drill of freezing air passed by him. It couldn’t have touched him, yet he felt a stabbing chill on his back, and his health gauge dropped ever so slightly.

“Nngh!” Gritting his teeth, he flew up toward the outside in the gap between the ice wall and the tornado.

At the same time, the cool whirling air reached the ground.

“Aah!” Chiyuri cried out in sorrow. And, at the edges of his vision, Haruyuki saw why.

The interior of the ice wall, ten meters around, was instantly dyed a snowy white. Diamond dust glittering in the pale dawn's light swirled and cloaked his comrades from view. And then, in the center of the space, pale-blue and purple and then brown light effects erupted upward one after another. Having already taken serious damage in the battle with Behemoth, Chocolat, Mint, and Plum had died, unable to withstand the tornado. A little after that, two green effects. Utan and Olive.

Haruyuki assumed—or rather hoped desperately—that the death effects would stop there.

But the crushing noise was relentless. Two blue lights near the outer edge. Cyan Pile and Aqua Current. Gray and reddish-purple in the center. Ash Roller and Magenta Scissor.

“They—!” Haruyuki groaned, hovering some distance away from the ice wall.

“Servant!” Metatron yelled again from his shoulder. “There!”

He hurriedly shifted his gaze. Someone had leapt down from the roof of a building on the west side of the battleground and was now approaching in several large jumps.

“Ngh...” He couldn't fight here. He spread the wings on his back and started to fly toward Shinagawa Station, which would have been to the southwest.

The sounds of not only his Oscillatory pursuer but also the avatars being swallowed up by the tornado chased after him. As he flew with everything he had, he counted them with every heartbeat.

Ten, eleven, twelve. For some reason, even though he couldn't see the effect color, Haruyuki could tell which sound was whose death. Cassis Moose, Thistle Porcupine, Ardor Maiden.

Thirteen. Blood Leopard.

And fourteen. Sky Raker.

“It can't be...,” Haruyuki said in a faint voice, tears welling up in the eye lenses beneath his goggles.

No matter how specialized in destruction Snow Fairy's Incarnate technique

was or how impossible Ivory Tower's Incarnate technique made it to use Incarnate techniques, he simply couldn't believe that even the veteran high ranker Elements and Triplex could be killed instantly in a single blow. And now that he was thinking about it, this was the first time he'd come face-to-face with a scenario in which Fuko, Utai, and Akira fell.

It can't be, he was about to say once more when the fifteenth sound of destruction reached his ear. Swallowing his breath, he did a recount of his comrades in the back of his mind.

Sixteen people had been trapped in the prison of ice, basically the entire attacking team. Haruyuki and Chiyuri had escaped, leaving fourteen in the prison. In which case, the fifteenth sound of death he'd just heard...

Of course. Ivory Tower. To prevent Nega Nebulus from escaping from the Last Glacial Period, he'd snuck up right next to them and canceled their Incarnate techniques. And then he'd gotten caught up in Brinicle and died.

Fairy's Incarnate technique was terrifyingly, overwhelmingly powerful. But what was even more terrifying was that the White Legion were so serious that they didn't balk at sacrificing one of their own, effectively the number two of their Legion. They were intent on killing Nega Nebulus's main force and banishing them forever from the Accelerated World.

"Our friends...!" Chiyuri cried out, face pressed up against Haruyuki's chest. He tried to find something to say to the childhood friend he'd just barely managed to save, but before he could, Metatron's voice came in warning once more.

"Servant, you're being pursued!"

"What?!"

Looking over his shoulder, he did indeed see a single black shadow leaping from rooftop to rooftop, chasing after them at basically Haruyuki's speed. That was some serious jumping power, but it was less than five hundred meters now to the Shinagawa Station. If he just kept on flying and dived into the portal, he could evade the danger for the time being. Once Haruyuki and Chiyuri woke up inside the bus running along Meiji-dori Street in the real world, they could remove the Neurolinkers from the necks of Fuko and the others, and all their

avatars would vanish from the Unlimited Neutral Field, thereby escaping the threat of Unlimited PK.

The Oscillatory side also had to have known that, which was why they tried to capture them, so that none of the members of Nega Nebulus would escape. And that was why they'd sent someone after Haruyuki. But he couldn't let himself be caught. He absolutely had to reach the portal and save his friends.

"Aaaah!" Prepared to use up everything that was left in his health gauge, Haruyuki increased the frequency of the vibration of his wings.

Ahead, the multipurpose super-skyscraper at Shinagawa Station, built with the redevelopment of 2020, rose up darkly into the sky. The portal was inside the entrance on the first floor. Because he was carrying Lime Bell, he couldn't hit his normal maximum speed, but at this pace, they would reach the portal while maintaining the distance from their pursuer.

Haruyuki tried to knock his speed up to the next level in order to pull through the remaining three hundred meters.

However.

"Crow...That—!!" He heard Metatron's voice once more, this time even more tense than before.

And then Haruyuki saw it, too. An enormous black shadow with organic curves crouching in the rotary in front of the station building.

The shadow writhed ponderously, perhaps sensing the approach of Haruyuki and his friends. Several heads stretched up at length from the short, stout torso, and countless red eyes glittered. Given its height of some ten meters or more, there was no doubt it was Beast level or higher.

"That is a Hydra-type high-level Being! This is not an opponent you can defeat!" Normally, Metatron would try to make him attack no matter how powerful the enemy, but she checked him fiercely now. However, if they didn't enter that Enemy's aggro range, they couldn't reach the portal at Shinagawa Station.

"Dammit! Why?!" Haruyuki gritted his teeth at the question of why now, of all times, at this critical juncture, a Super-class Enemy was camped out right in

front of the portal, before gasping sharply.

It couldn't have been a coincidence. Through some means, the White Legion had lured that Enemy to the portal and fixed it there—to prevent the members of Nega Nebulus from leaving the Unlimited Neutral Field. Just like the Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron had been forcibly moved from the Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth to Tokyo Midtown.

When he looked even more closely, he saw a silver crown with sharp thorns biting into the center of the Enemy's head. He had no doubt it was the same as the silver circlet that had once restrained Metatron.

"They would go that far!" Groaning quietly, he spread his wings to decelerate, left with no other choice. There were other portals in the area besides the one at Shinagawa Station, but for all that, they likely had Super-class Enemies placed at each of them. He didn't have much left in his special-attack gauge, either; he would have to descend and recharge it.

After a glance back, Haruyuki landed on the roof of a large hotel some distance from the station. Their pursuer was probably still on the trail, but he couldn't imagine that whoever it was could climb the iron walls without handholds. He set Lime Bell on her feet.

"Chiyu, you okay?"

"Yeah...I'm fine. No damage." Chiyuri answered bravely, but then she quickly lowered her face. "But...Everyone else...All of them..."

Haruyuki silently patted her back. Even through her duel avatar's hard armor, he could feel her trembling. He was just as shocked himself. They might have had three separate Incarnate techniques piled on against them, but the fact that the executives of both Nega Nebulus and Prominence had been annihilated in an instant was nothing other than a nightmare.

However, they couldn't just stay there like that. Their fourteen comrades would regenerate in an hour, and they would very likely be killed again instantaneously with the same multiple Incarnate techniques. Fuko and the other high rankers had points to spare, but that wasn't necessarily the case for Ash Roller and his gang—or for the members of Petit Paquet. They had to return to the bus in the real world as soon as possible and remove everyone's

Neurolinkers.

“Metatron, where’s the next-nearest portal?” Haruyuki asked in a hoarse voice, holding Chiyuri in his arms.

The 3-D icon moved to be positioned in front of Haruyuki’s face and indicated the southwest with one wing. “It’s approximately a kilometer in that direction.”

Hurriedly drawing out a map of the Minato area in his mind, he overlaid the landmarks in the real world. “Gotanda Station, then...”

“But, Servant, most likely...”

Haruyuki guessed what Metatron wasn’t saying and gave voice to the thoughts he’d had earlier. “Yeah, there’s probably a different Super-class Enemy placed there, too. Maybe we should just head for a faraway portal.”

“I can confirm from the Highest Level the presence of a Being in the vicinity of the portal, but there is a strong possibility that that Snow Fairy or what have you will interfere again, regardless of the distance. If the link between us is severed, the situation will be all that much worse.”

Metatron was right. The only advantage Haruyuki and Chiyuri had against the Oscillatory side was Metatron’s presence. Even the White Legion wouldn’t be able to easily obtain the full cooperation of a Divine-class Enemy. Tactically, he couldn’t lose her, and emotionally, he couldn’t stand the thought of being without this rapport they had.

In other words, in this battlefield, at least, scouting from the Highest Level was effectively not an option.

“Once I recharge my special-attack gauge, we’ll fly south to Kawasaki. They can’t have set Enemies outside of Tokyo, too...I think,” Haruyuki muttered, half to reassure himself, and then took his hand off Chiyuri’s back and looked around.

The roof of the hotel was deserted, but there were decorative objects arranged along the outer edges that would probably have been air ducts and solar panels in the real world. If he could smash those, he’d be able to recover his special-attack gauge to some degree.

“Hang on a sec,” Haruyuki said to Chiyuri as he was about to move toward the closest of the objects.

However, Metatron suddenly flashed a tapered beam of light, and taking this as a warning, Haruyuki instantly reached for the hilt of the sword on his hip—the Enhanced Armament Lucid Blade.

In the right edge of his field of view, there was another small flicker. By the time he realized it was a reflection of the dawn light dyeing the eastern sky red, Haruyuki had yanked his sword upward.

A glittering blade grazed Lime Bell’s pointed hat and squealed sharply. Repelled by Haruyuki’s quick draw, a metal stick with six sharply tapered cross sections was thrust into the roof—a so-called *bo-shuriken*. The sickening color painted on the skin of the steel was probably poison.

“Who’s there?!” Haruyuki called out to the north side of the roof, keeping Chiyuri behind him. But the answer to that question was more than half-apparent. It had to have been the member of Oscillatory who’d been pursuing them.

Finally, a human figure appeared as if bleeding out from behind an air duct. His face mask hid everything but his eye lenses, and the thin armor had a somehow traditionally Japanese shape to it. The naked body of the avatar was very slightly exposed around the neck and upper arms, and this was covered in a bodysuit that looked as if it had been knit from wire. He didn’t need to see the dark-gray, blue-tinged color of the armor; the nature of their pursuer was clear from the design motif.

“A ninja?” Chiyuri murmured from behind him.

Without reacting to Haruyuki’s challenge or Chiyuri’s question, the ninja-shaped avatar thrust his right hand into his chest. The fingers that reemerged had two *shuriken* wedged between them, exactly the same as the one that had stabbed into the roof.

Since the large majority of buildings in a Demon City stage were impenetrable, the blue ninja must have climbed the dozens of meters up the side of the building, with essentially no handholds. From this fact alone, it was obvious that Haruyuki needed to keep his guard up tight against this opponent.

But he couldn't fall now. Absolutely not.

"Haru, I'm fine. I can protect myself," Chiyuri said, leaping far back before dropping into a defensive position.

Nodding wordlessly, Haruyuki readied his sword directly in front of his body. He'd obtained Lucid Blade as his level-six bonus, and that day was the first time he was using it in actual combat. If he was being completely honest, he was overwhelmingly unaccustomed to it when his fighting style so far had been punches and kicks, but even so, it meant a great deal to him to be holding the sword.

With the silver blade turned on him, the ninja avatar reached a hand around to his back and drew a truncated blade from the black-lacquer sheath equipped there. Single-edged with no curve to it, a so-called ninja sword.

Gripping the two *shuriken* in his right hand and the shortsword in his left, the avatar moved nonchalantly, almost as though the idea of two against one didn't bother him in the slightest. He took three steps forward.

And then vanished.

Except—he had simply bounded to the right at incredible speed. Haruyuki managed to catch a fragment of a blue afterimage in the corner of his eye, and he sought out the figure of his enemy as he leapt in the opposite direction.

He wasn't there. Despite the fact that there was absolutely nothing to hide behind in the center of the roof, there wasn't another soul in the wide-open area. But it had only been the blink of an eye since the ninja stepped out of Haruyuki's sight; there was no way he would have been able to leave the roof in that span of time.

Haruyuki stopped for a moment.

"*Servant! Below!*" The thought from Metatron pierced his head like a lightning bolt. But the area at his feet was covered in the steel of the Demon City stage, and only the shadow of the skyscraper a little ways off to the east—

Haruyuki gasped.

From within that shadow, the blue ninja appeared, accompanied by the faint

babbling of water, slicing his sword toward Haruyuki's right ankle.

If Haruyuki had thrust Lucid Blade downward even a millisecond later, he likely would have had his foot amputated. But the blade just barely managed to defend against the cutting attack, and it squealed fiercely, sparks shooting everywhere. It was all Haruyuki could do to hold on to the sword; a counterattack was out of the question. But rather than fight against the reactive force, the ninja slipped out of the shadow and once again put some distance between them.

Haruyuki pulled the tip of his sword out from where it had bitten ever so slightly into the steel floor and stepped once more into the shadow with his uninjured foot. But the only thing he felt was unyielding hardness; his foot showed no sign of sinking down.

In other words, he was looking at either the ninja avatar's special attack or ability. He must have used the same power to climb the hotel wall. And Haruyuki was already familiar with a similar technique.

"That was Black Vise's technique just now," Haruyuki said in a low voice, staring intently at the still-silent ninja.

Here the man finally responded. He narrowed his dark eye lenses into a thread, and a voice worn like a cold wind in the dead of winter rang out. "Indeed. The secret technique Shadow Lurker, taught to me by my master."

"So then you acknowledge it. The fact that the Acceleration Research Society's Black Vise is a member of Oscillatory Universe!" Haruyuki had intended this to be cutting, but his adversary showed not the slightest sign of upset.

"Inevitable, that knowledge," he replied calmly. "Thus determined, those persons shall find total loss here." The dark-blue eye lenses shone briefly with a light as cold as ice.

There had been no information about a ninja-type avatar in Kuroyukihime's notes. Which meant, at the very least, he wasn't one of the Seven Dwarves, but even *if* he was as powerful as the likes of Glacier Behemoth or Snow Fairy, Haruyuki absolutely could not allow himself to be defeated. Fuko, Utai, and the others had gone so far as to sacrifice themselves so that Haruyuki and Chiyuri

could get away. Even if all the nearby portals were blocked, he absolutely had to return to the real world and save everyone from this death trap.

This resolve humming through every cell of his body, Haruyuki readjusted his grip on his beloved sword. In response, the ninja also wordlessly readied the shortsword in his left hand.

What Haruyuki believed was the advantage to having a sword was the fact that it expanded his own range of options while simultaneously narrowing his opponent's.

In the real world, the sword had fallen out of use in actual combat with the sudden development of the gun and had been transformed into a symbolic and decorative tool, but that was not necessarily the case in the Accelerated World. Just as could be gleaned from the fact that the red-type avatars and their long-distance attacks could fight just as well as blue-type avatars with close-range attacks, a duel avatar's sword could perform in ways that surpassed a gun.

What made this possible was the Burst Linker's super-high reaction speed. Just as Haruyuki had repelled the poisoned *shuriken* earlier, he could defend against attacks that he would otherwise have been forced to use a bare hand against. Pushing this defense via sword to the extreme, he would even be able to handle large artillery and missiles.

When Haruyuki readied his sword, the ninja had pulled out his own. Now, though he still had the two *shuriken* in his right hand, he could only throw them *with* that hand.

I'll bring the fight in close and stop him from sinking into the shadows. If it's a contest of speed, I can't lose! Even against a ninja!

With this intention close to his heart, Haruyuki used up what little remained of his special-attack gauge and pushed the wings on his back into action without shifting his position in the slightest. A full-speed dash with no preparatory movement, followed by his sword slicing downward—or at least a show of that—before launching a mid-kick.

The surprise attack only half succeeded; the kick was blocked with an elbow. The ninja's armor strength did indeed appear to be the bare minimum, however, so while Haruyuki couldn't see his opponent's health gauge, the

feedback he got told him the damage had made it all the way to the naked avatar body inside.

While Haruyuki's leg was still in the air, he used the charge to his special-attack gauge he'd gotten from the blow to swing into a right roundhouse kick. The ninja guarded against this, too, with his other elbow, but now that both arms had been hit with Haruyuki's unique stinging Aerial Combo blows, they would have to have been numbed, if only for an instant.

"Hah!" Using his wings again for a short-distance thrust, this time he really did bring his sword down with a battle cry. Given how close together they were, Lucid Blade's sharp edge should have caught the ninja's torso. However.

"Nin!" The ninja uttered a strange cry, and instead of retreating, he took a step closer and caught the sword on his forehead. The headband armor shattered soon enough, but a metal band like the bowl of a helmet was wrapped around the forehead of the naked body, bringing the slicing sword to a halt. Once again, a shower of sparks erupted.

"Whoa!" Haruyuki had put everything he had into the blow when he launched it in midair, and now with this unexpected defense, he lost his balance.

"Dan!" the ninja grunted, and the sword in his left hand flashed.

Haruyuki desperately thrust backward with his wings, but the shortsword slid into a gap in between the armor of his forearm and the palm of his hand to cut into the naked body of his avatar. Fortunately, the cut was shallow, and he lost less than 5 percent of his health gauge, but if it had been a few centimeters deeper, he would have lost the use of his right hand.

Once he succeeded in somehow managing to put some distance between them, he readjusted his grip on his sword, clenching his teeth against the pain in his hand. The ninja also readied his blade in a backhand grip without a word.

Judging from the earlier shadow surprise attack and this blow just now, it was clear the man was aiming for Haruyuki's extremities—a fighting style that sought to do damage by amputation, terrifying.

But Haruyuki didn't get the sense that he was enjoying the duel in the slightest. Maybe that was only natural in this situation, though—Oscillatory was

trying to drive all the members of Nega Nebulus to total point loss; this was nothing other than total slaughter.

Haruyuki wanted to at least ask his opponent's name, but he got the feeling that the other Burst Linker would never answer him, so he closed his mouth before it was fully open and focused his entire mind on the tip of Lucid Blade.

Lucid was an adjective meaning *aware*, with the root word apparently being the Latin word for *light*. And just as the name would suggest, the sword had one special ability. To activate it, he needed to fight under normal status and charge his attack-energy gauge above a certain amount; but after the intense battle with Behemoth, he more than met that condition.

“Conversion.”

In response to Haruyuki's voice command, Lucid Blade's silver body was enveloped in a pure-white light from the base as it whined in vibration. And it wasn't simply glowing. The metal sword itself was transformed into a so-called energy blade. In this state, the sword lost basically all mass and could no longer catch or reflect the hard bodies of weapons or bullets. Instead, it would cause essentially all objects to melt due to its super-high temperature, and if the weapon was such high priority that it could withstand this heat, the blade would instead slip through it. Most likely, his adversary's sword was in that range.

And yet, Haruyuki had a reason for daring to “convert” Lucid Blade—the powerful light that the sword itself generated.

After narrowing his eye lenses momentarily at the dazzling brightness of the energy blade, the ninja glanced down at his feet. He must have noticed the new shadow trying to make an appearance at his feet because the gradually increasing brightness of the dawn had been wiped out by the light of the sword. Of course, deep shadows were cut into the world behind them, but if the ninja's Shadow Lurker was the same level as Black Vise's, then he wouldn't be able to dive into his own shadow.

Meanwhile, Haruyuki had used up his special-attack gauge in the full-powered back thrust earlier. From now on, this would be a simple contest of technique against technique.

"It's okay! I'm going to win!" In his mind, Haruyuki spoke to Chiyuri and Metatron silently watching over him. He knew they had faith in him, but they were also likely on pins and needles. He readied the lightsword in the orthodox midway position in front of himself.

At the same time, the ninja followed suit, his own sword before him diagonally in a backhand grip. His right hand still clutched the two *bo-shuriken*, but at sword's length, he wouldn't be able to throw them. The next time Haruyuki charged in, he would press in on his opponent until the end, glued to him.

Building up resolve deep in his stomach, Haruyuki moved to kick off the steel ground just as the ninja's body blurred gray—his super-high-speed movement. But this time, Haruyuki didn't miss seeing the slight change in his center of gravity.

Left!

He obeyed his instincts over visual confirmation and launched a horizontal slash.

Bwon! The lightsword hummed, and the tip caught a hazy shadow. A pale beam of light scattered from the thin armor, but then the ninja's figure blurred in flowing lines once more.

Up...No, down!

Holding his breath, Haruyuki yanked back the consciousness that was turning toward the sky and moved to beat directly downward with the lightsword.

But before he could, the ninja plastered himself to the floor like a giant spider and slid his shortsword toward Haruyuki's ankle.

He could dodge it if he jumped. But given that he couldn't use his wings, he wouldn't be able to respond to the next hit if he leapt up into the air. And more importantly...

"Here!" Haruyuki kicked at the oncoming blade with everything he had.

Skreek! The earsplitting sound of metal clashing rang in his ears, as orange sparks and crimson particles jetted outward.

The sword flew out of the ninja's hand and clattered onto the floor, but Haruyuki's right leg was severed at the ankle at the same time. The pain—fireworks and electric shocks—raced up to the top of his head, but he gritted his teeth and brought his sword down.

Because of his unnatural position, the blow didn't carry his full weight, but the lightsword's attack didn't require weight; as the ninja tried to roll away on the floor, the energy blade cut into his left shoulder, melting the arm away from its base with a roaring impact.

One more...hit!

He braced his severed leg on the floor, and the intense pain caused his field of view to go white again, but he clenched his teeth and brandished the lightsword. Using his special-attack gauge, now recharged thanks to the massive damage both taken and inflicted, he gave everything he had to a thrust dash.

The shining blade was sucked in toward the shoulder of the enemy, who was starting to get to his feet. All he had to do was bring it down, and the ninja avatar would be severed in two. The tip of the blade made contact with the blue-gray armor and instantly melted—

Haruyuki's entire body creaked and groaned to a stop.

Stunned, he opened his eyes wide, but not only had he stopped moving, he couldn't even speak. It was as if he were completely encased in transparent plastic. His body was leaning forward as far as possible with only the toes of his left foot touching the floor, yet Lucid Blade's impact-energy gauge dropped to zero, and the blade returned to its original metal form.

The ninja slipped out from beneath the sword on the verge of ripping through his left shoulder and stood up straight. Haruyuki finally noticed that the two *bo-shuriken* had disappeared from his right hand at some point.

Had he thrown them in the middle of battle? But they weren't piercing his duel avatar anywhere, and anyway a simple numbness was one thing, but there was no way a poison that could bring about this mysterious freezing could actually exist.

When he managed to move his eyes and shift his gaze as far to the left as

possible, he saw that Chiyuri was similarly frozen in place at the edge of the roof. She was reaching out a hand toward him as if to warn him of something. A long shadow stretched out from her feet, the product of the morning sun. And at the tip, in the center of the silhouette of her pointed hat, a dark, long, slender piece of metal—the ninja’s *shuriken*—was standing quietly.

Even as he told himself it was impossible, he sent his gaze racing toward his own shadow, the place where Chiyuri was pointing. And there, in the head of Silver Crow’s shadow, wings stretching out from his back, he found the other *shuriken*.

As Haruyuki noticed this, Metatron’s voice rang out in his mind. “*Servant, this is direct interference with the Mean Level—the power of the Incarnayte System!*”

“A-an Incarnate technique?!” He was ready to retort that he hadn’t heard any technique name, but then he noticed that the *shuriken* piercing the head of his shadow was enveloped in an extremely faint gray haze. There was no mistake: That was Incarnate overlay.

The call of a technique name was an important trigger in activating Incarnate techniques, but unlike special attacks, it wasn’t a factor required by the system. The man must have spent long hours training so he could activate the technique without shouting the name. And not only that. During battle, he had probably tossed the two *shuriken* straight upward and had them drop down precisely on the heads of Chiyuri’s and Haruyuki’s shadows. This, too, was amazing.

Frozen in place, sword brandished in one hand, Haruyuki heard the hoarse voice of his opponent.

“Secret technique, Shadow Tying.” The announcement of the name came very much after the fact.

The ninja picked up his shortsword deftly and flipped it around to point down, showing no hint of the pain of having his left arm melted away.

“Your life is forfeit!” he hissed, closing the distance between them as though he were sliding along the steel floor surface. Divine speed and a special sword attack closed in on Haruyuki’s neck.

If he died there, the ninja would take Chiyuri's head next. He'd do it over and over and drive both of them to total point loss. Haruyuki couldn't let that happen.

Placing all his bets on a sliver of hope, he concentrated his imagination into his wings. If he was being held by an Incarnate technique, then it was possible to break the restraint with an Incarnate technique. He couldn't speak, so he wouldn't be able to yell the technique name, but even still, he had to try. Forgetting at some point the pain in his right leg, Haruyuki mustered up every bit of his mental energy.

Light...

But he couldn't activate the Incarnate technique.

The ninja also couldn't take Haruyuki's head, however.

"Blast Wave!!"

He heard a cool, clear shout, accompanied by a high-speed shock wave coming right at him—or rather, a crescent-moon-shaped slicing wave slammed into the ninja.

Now he did indeed show a reaction, throwing up his shortsword in defense, but he was pushed backward over ten meters altogether, the ground squealing and creaking beneath him.

A figure landed silently between Haruyuki and his adversary. Haruyuki knew who it was simply from the voice.

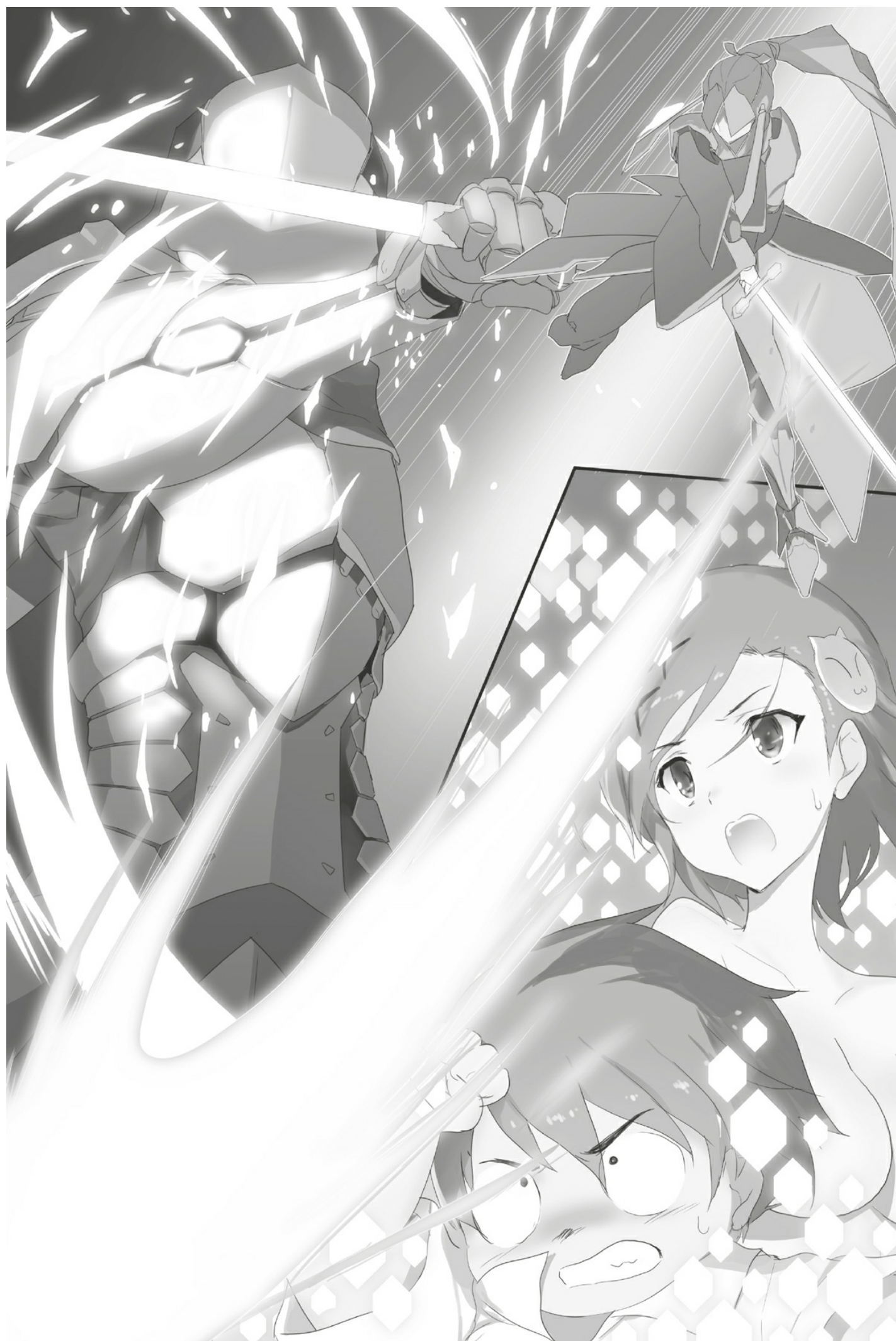
The design of the armor, shining a deep sapphire blue, was reminiscent of an ancient noble. The hairstyle of a young samurai, not yet come of age, and the cool, sky-blue eye lenses. In his right hand was held a somewhat slender straightsword, an overwhelming sense of presence clinging to it.

Trilead Tetroxide. The young samurai had only just joined Nega Nebulus before the start of the Territories, and now he glanced at Haruyuki, nodding as if to say, "Leave this to me."

Facing forward again, he readjusted his grip on the two-handed sword. It was one of the Seven Arcs, The Infinity.

Trilead had been instructed to stay on standby to the rear until the opening of hostilities. Most likely, he'd noticed Haruyuki in flight and the ninja in pursuit and had come after them. Given that he didn't have the ability to dive into shadows or anything, he'd have to have undertaken the life-threatening and serious task of climbing the hotel wall. But Trilead had climbed it. To save Haruyuki and Chiyuri.

"Oh, Lead..." Haruyuki earnestly called out to his friend in his immovable mouth.



“You’ve been saved, hmm, Servant?” Metatron also sounded relieved, having already met Trilead in the Castle.

“Yeah...But...” He pushed away the new anxiety bleeding into his heart without letting it into his thoughts.

Lead *would* win. He was the sole child of the Anomaly Graphite Edge, and he’d trained to become a transcendent swordsman, befitting the owner of an Arc.

Haruyuki prayed desperately, still restrained by the ninja’s Incarnate technique.

The navy ninja and sapphire samurai continued to face each other wordlessly. The tips of both the shortsword, with its dull-steel-gray blade, and the straightsword, with its hint of icy blue, didn’t so much as twitch, both aimed squarely at their opponents.

In the silence, only the massive morning sun continued to inch its way upward. The buildings standing to the east of the hotel were already showing more than half their faces, and the bloodred light of the dawn pierced the thick clouds of the Demon City stage to shine down on them. The ninja stood on the west side and Lead on the east, so Lead’s shadow stretched out near the enemy’s feet. If a *shuriken* got lodged in his head, Lead would also be rendered immobile, so Haruyuki wanted to warn him somehow, but he still couldn’t even speak.

“He’ll be all right, Servant,” Metatron spoke to him in his mind, as if reading his thoughts—or maybe she had actually read them, in fact. *“Trilead Tetroxide must have realized that the dagger plunged into your shadow is the reason you cannot move.”*

“Yeah...And that dagger’s called a shuriken.”

“Oh-ho! I shall remember this.”

It wasn’t as though Trilead could have heard Metatron, but for a mere instant, he dropped his gaze to the *shuriken* plunged into Haruyuki’s shadow.

Instantly, the ninja moved. His sword-arm flashed like lightning, and he pulled

a third *shuriken* out from his chest with his fingertips. With just a snap of his wrist, he tossed it at Lead's shadow on the floor.

Clack! A hard sound rang out, and the sharp blade dug into the steel floor.

But the instant before it did, reacting at a speed that would have been impossible had he not been anticipating the blow, Lead turned his head and made his shadow dodge the *shuriken*. He planted a foot hard on the floor.

"Kaaaaaaaah!!" With a shriek, he launched a slicing stroke diagonally to the right.

It was incredibly fast; so fast that even Haruyuki's eyes couldn't pick it up, and he was accustomed to high-speed battle. There couldn't have been many swordmasters in the Accelerated World who could have swung the two-handed greatsword that was The Infinity at such a speed.

However.

The blow with Trilead's full weight behind it sliced through only an afterimage of the ninja, barely visible as he zipped through the air. The blast of wind kicked up by the Arc made the thick steel floor shudder. Having swung the heavy blade, Lead sank down, bending at the knees to absorb the massive inertial energy.

The ninja didn't miss this hint of an opening.

"Zan!" Having dodged Lead's blow, the ninja flashed his shortsword as he passed by. A red damage effect shot off the young samurai's right elbow, and deep-blue fragments followed.

Straightening up again, Trilead tried to counterattack with a horizontal slash while turning around forcefully, but by that time, the ninja had already put some space between them again.

Fortunately for Lead, the armor shape around his elbows was complicated, and while the ninja had been looking for severance damage, he hadn't managed to completely catch the seam. Trilead had barely managed to avoid having his right arm severed, but the tip of the ninja's sword had to have reached down to his avatar's flesh, causing him intense pain. Worry wormed its way into Haruyuki's heart.

Trilead Tetroxide had been inside the Castle all this time, meaning that this was probably his first person-to-person fight that wasn't training. And it wasn't even in the Normal Duel Field, but in the Unlimited Neutral Field, in a slaughter where Incarnate techniques were more than possible and extra-painful.

Naturally, Lead had undergone extensive, even cruel training with Graphite Edge, one of the most powerful swordsmen in the Accelerated World. Strong enough to freely manipulate the Arc of Infinity, which Haruyuki would have barely been able to hold on to. Trilead was easily in master territory, technique-wise.

But in a real battle where anything could happen, you couldn't win with skills alone. You needed the determination to deceive your opponent, hide yourself, and use anything and everything at your disposal.

And the shadow-using ninja was no doubt a master of attacking his opponents' weak points, given that he had named the Acceleration Research Society's Black Vise his master. To fight an opponent like this, Trilead's sword was too beautiful, too pure—and too honest.

Crimson light dripping from his elbow, Lead readied his sword directly in front of himself once more.

The dark eyes of the ninja shone coldly beneath his metal forehead covering.

"It's no use, Lead. No matter how fast you strike, if you show any initial motion, you'll never hit that ninja!" Haruyuki called desperately in his mind, but his thoughts couldn't reach Lead.

His comrade had to have felt the fierce speed of the ninja. But the young samurai did not flinch; he attacked from square one once more. Taking a large step forward, he brandished the greatsword.

"Seiyaaaaaah!"

A heroic downward strike from on high, enough to sever even the air. It wasn't a special attack, yet pale sparks bounded across the stage, and even Haruyuki's body, in forced stasis, shuddered and shook.

This was a blow so powerful that if it hit its target, Haruyuki wouldn't have been surprised if it ripped his health gauge out from the root. But his misgivings

turned to reality once more.

“Nin!!”

Call echoing in the air, the ninja’s figure blurred. With divine speed, he dodged the powerful blow and shot out with a counterattack in a flash of white light.

The sword shimmered, and a large damage effect jetted from the back of Lead’s neck. The ninja wasn’t aiming for the limbs, but rather instant death through beheading.

A second layer of ice descended on Haruyuki’s body as he stared while Lead swayed. But the samurai managed to brace himself somehow. A wound about five centimeters long was revealed when the droplets of virtual blood had settled down.

The reason his head hadn’t been completely cut off was because Lead’s downward slice had been exaggeratedly full power—or put another way, he had attacked with the intent of sacrificing his own self. The gut knowledge that the ninja wouldn’t escape with a mere scratch made him take an extra-large step to avoid the blade.

That said, the tables had most definitely not yet turned in their favor. Trilead just barely dodged the next blow. If he took another blow from that sword in the same place, the damage would be lethal.

“Lead!” Feeling as if he had to somehow break the ninja’s Incarnate restraint, Haruyuki tried to focus his imagination again.

“Believe in Trilead, Servant.” Metatron’s voice echoed in the back of his mind.

“...But...!”

“It was you who taught me the ability to have an information link—no, a ‘bond.’”

His eyes flew open at this. Adjusting his gaze, he saw Chiyuri staring back at him intently with her large eye lenses, similarly restrained on the south side of the roof. Although he saw worry and frustration there, he saw no hint of despair. She, too, believed Lead would get out of this predicament.

"I guess you're right," Haruyuki murmured in return, once again focusing his mind. Not in order to forcefully break the ninja's Shadow Tying with his own Incarnate, but so he could move the second the ninja's focus was broken by Lead's attack and the technique was canceled.

Although deeply wounded on his elbow and his neck, Trilead readied his greatsword for the third time at waist level.

The one-armed ninja also held his ninja sword in a backhand grip with his right hand. There wasn't a drop of wasted energy in his stance, and his cold bloodlust came through loud and clear with the message that this time he *would* take Lead's head.

After inhaling deeply, Lead gently raised the Arc he gripped in both hands to a position up above his head.

In response, the ninja also lowered his center of gravity the slightest bit.

The tension in the air grew a hundredfold. Perhaps in response to the swirling blood lust, the clouds began to rise up and cover the nearly risen morning sun.

As if refusing to be pushed back by the encroaching darkness, Lead's battle cry gushed from his throat. *"Taaaaaaaah!!"*

Stepping forward hard enough to crack the steel panels of the roof, his sword came down with a roar like thunder. This was, without a doubt, the blow containing the most raw power Haruyuki had ever seen in any normal attack he'd witnessed thus far. It shook him to his core, surpassing even World End's and Anomaly's slashing blows.

But of course, it was too much of a straightforward stroke.

Once again, the figure of the ninja melted into flowing lines. In a step that was also terrifyingly fast, he dodged to the left. The greatsword cut through the blue-black afterimage and, not stopping in the air, went on to dig into the floor.

A booming roar ripped past Haruyuki, so loud that he was convinced it would have ruptured his eardrums if duel avatars had them. The force of the overhead slice was completely absorbed by the iron plates, the Arc cutting deep into the building of the Demon City stage, and then stopped.

Lead was unable to move, and the ninja blade closed in on his neck in a sneak attack.

However, at the same time, the rupture The Infinity had created stretched out in a straight line—and swallowed up the small *shuriken* pinned into Haruyuki's shadow.

There was no way this was a coincidence.

Lead had been aiming for this from the start. As he swung his sword in his simple, honest slices and swallowed the painful counterattacks, he'd moved to a position where he could aim for Haruyuki's restraints. If Lead had taken any obvious interest in the *shuriken*, the ninja would have no doubt prioritized taking off Haruyuki's head. To prevent him from doing that, Lead had played dumb and used himself as a pawn to create a momentary opening. In which case, Haruyuki had to rise to that challenge.

The instant the *shuriken* was swallowed up in the fissure and the restraint released, Haruyuki was moving. Half instinctively, he thrust his blade toward the back of the ninja about to take Lead's head off. Seven meters between them. This was not a distance he could cross no matter how he stretched his arm.

However.

As he sent the imagination power he'd so intently built up while restrained to his hand, Haruyuki shouted, "Laser Lance!!"

Pure-white light jetted from the tip of his sword. This light was obviously narrower, sharper, and faster than the Laser Lance he'd been able to activate before with his bare hand.

The time it took for the ninja to dodge Lead's blow, step in, and slash with his ninja sword couldn't have been more than a second. But the Incarnate lance launched from Lucid Blade pierced the ninja's back before his special-attack blade could cut into Lead's neck.

Even duel avatars with no flesh and blood to speak of had what were known as critical points. So, for instance, if their head was cut off, the majority of avatars would die instantly. The next critical point was in the center of the

chest, in the position of the heart, and no avatars except those with extremely high endurance could have a hole opened up there and not die.

Having had his heart pierced by Haruyuki's Incarnate technique, the ninja was only able to make a shallow cut on Lead's cheek, his blade knocked off target by the impact. He stopped with his ninja sword brandished high above his head, and Haruyuki fully expected him to scatter in all directions.

However.

"Nin!!" Shouting louder than he had before, the ninja quickly rotated his upper body, light effect spilling from the hole in his chest, and tried to thrust the shortsword into Lead's neck once again.

But an instant before he could, the young samurai pulled his trusty blade from the rupture in the floor.

"Aaaaaii!" Shouting, he yanked the thick blade up and to the right.

The sun pushed through the clouds once more and illuminated the motionless ninja and the young samurai. From where Haruyuki stood, their shadows looked like half silhouettes, and then one of them split soundlessly in the middle and tumbled to the floor. It jetted up blue-black flames before bursting and scattering.

Slowly getting to his feet, Trilead tucked the greatsword away in the sheath on his left hip, and Haruyuki was about to race over to him, lost in the moment. But he totally forgot that his right foot had been cut off, so he lost his balance and nearly fell over.

"Whoops!" Chiyuri called out, coming up from behind to support him, having been released from the Incarnate restraint at the moment of the ninja's death.

He stood, leaning on his childhood friend's shoulder, and waved a hand wildly. *"Lea—,"* he started to shout, but just when he was in danger of the 3-D icon on his shoulder whapping him on the head with her wing, he noticed it.

A modest dark-gray death marker remained in the place where the ninja had died. Haruyuki and his comrades couldn't see him, but the ninja avatar still existed there in a ghost state. Lead was Trilead Tetroxide's nickname, but even still, there was no need to give it up to their enemy. Letting him hear their

conversation was absurd.

Guessing the reason that Haruyuki snapped his mouth shut, Lead was also silent as he walked over to them, and he bowed lightly with a smile.

Nodding in return, Haruyuki turned back to the silently spinning death marker and said in a hard voice, "If we wanted to, we could kill you again with an Incarnate technique the moment you regenerate here in an hour or set up some dangerous energy...But we won't. We're not like the Acceleration Research Society."

Of course, he couldn't hear the reply. But even if the death marker could speak, Haruyuki couldn't imagine that the ninja avatar would give him an answer when he hadn't even given voice to his own name. Haruyuki looked back and held out his left hand to Chiyuri and his right to Lead.

They approached and grabbed onto him. After checking that his special-attack gauge was charged nearly 80 percent, he spread the wings on his back and took off. Maintaining a high altitude, he looked down just one more time at the roof of the hotel.

The ninja avatar had called Black Vise *master*. Did he know that Vise had cruelly abandoned Dusk Taker, his former comrade in the Acceleration Research Society? That to Vise, it wasn't just Taker, but probably also Rust Jigsaw and Sulfur Pot and maybe even the Quad Eyes Analyst, who were nothing more than pawns for the sake of achieving his objective?

Haruyuki pulled his gaze away from the ghost that would've been standing near the death marker and flew off to the southeast.

“Headed your way, Lotus!”

Hearing the call of the second Red King, the Black King readied the swords that made up her arms before and behind her.

Charging toward her and making the ground shake was a Beast-class Enemy, Grada. Eight short legs sprang from its knotty torso, and a thick carapace covered its entire body; it looked like a microscopic water bear that had been enlarged tens of thousands of times over. In fact, it had apparently gotten its name from early Burst Linkers riffing on its scientific name, the tardigrade.

Just as its name would suggest, it boasted an overwhelming toughness, and although Niko’s handgun had carved countless bullet holes out of the gray carapace, it seemed that almost none had pierced it. Niko’s initial equipment, Peace Maker, was capable of a so-called charged shot, and she boasted on a daily basis about how “You gimme twenty seconds o’ charging, and I’ll blow a giant hole in the ground even.” But now, unfortunately, they didn’t have that kind of time to spare. They were fighting a Beast-class Enemy alone, when this was the sort of monster normally hunted by a party of twenty people.

“Baguuuuh!” the Grada type cried out in a low rumble as it charged her.

Kuroyukihime stopped and waited for it. Nearly three minutes had passed already since the start of this unexpected battle. They couldn’t afford to waste any more time here. She set her sights on one of the dozens of bullet holes gouged into the Enemy’s head, where the slightest amount of blue-black liquid was leaking out. It was a nearly impossible feat to strike a precise blow on this three-centimeter hole as it bounced about wildly, but she had no choice but to try.

“Baguuuuh!” The massive tardigrade lowered its head to charge, forceful enough to bring down a building, and in that instant, Kuroyukihime thrust the sword of her right hand forward.

Her Terminate Sword ability could pierce all things, and that included even the head armor of this thing, but she wouldn’t be able to do any real damage plunging it in only five or ten centimeters. But the sword cut deep into the scar made by Niko, all the way up to her elbow, opening the hole wider.

Despite the fact that a sword was stabbed nearly a meter deep into its head, the Grada didn’t stop moving. It began to crash about even more violently, Kuroyukihime still on its head. If it charged into one of the buildings behind them, she could very well be crushed to death between the hard structure of the Demon City stage and the Enemy’s massive bulk. But she had anticipated this development.

“Death By Piercing!!” she cried out sharply as she pushed her arm even deeper.

A bluish-purple light jetted out of all the gunshot holes. Black Lotus’s level-five special attack, boasting a wide and long range, reflected and refracted against the inside of the tough carapace over and over, shredding any and all soft tissue. Light spilled out of cracks that raced along the tough shell as if connecting the dots of gunshot scars.

In the next instant, the Beast-class Enemy erupted in a burst of light that reached up into the dawn sky, and the massive body scattered in all directions.

Bathed in a universe of tiny particles, Kuroyukihime landed on the ground and let out a long sigh as Niko raced over to her.

“Dang it...Just like always, you go and do somethin’ wild. If you’d made one misstep there, you coulda ended up flat as a pancake.”

“I attacked with my arm, so it would be ‘one misarm.’”

“Oh yeah...I guess?” Niko cocked her head to one side, and Kuroyukihime pushed it upright with the flat of her blade.

“Ugh! That doesn’t matter! What’s more important...is what exactly’s going on here?” Kuroyukihime looked up at the sky of the stage.

The night of the Demon City stage absolutely did not break, yet the eastern sky was steadily growing redder. And the only health gauge visible to her was her own. And above all else, there were Enemies. Which meant...

“No matter which way you look at it, this is the Unlimited Neutral Field,” Niko muttered.

They were supposed to be handling the defense of their own territory in Suginami, instead of taking part in the attack on Minato Area No. 3, the headquarters of the White Legion, Oscillatory Universe. But when they’d gotten off the bus with Fuko Kurasaki, Haruyuki Arita, and the others and crossed over to the bus stop on the opposite side of the street, she’d seen someone who should not have been there in the window of the bus that followed.

Megumi Wakamiya. Umesato Junior High student council secretary and Kuroyukihime’s good friend.

Kuroyukihime had wondered for a while if Megumi wasn’t a former Burst Linker who had lost all her memories of the Accelerated World, and she couldn’t believe her being there now was a mere coincidence. So she’d decided to give chase on the next bus. Along the way, they’d switched to a taxi, and she’d gone so far as to use the forbidden SSS Order program to cross the area boundary immediately before four PM and spontaneously take part in the Territories.

But after she and Niko appeared on the Rainbow Bridge, on the far edge of the area, they’d run for a few minutes toward the center of the stage in order to meet up with the rest of their team, and that was when a veil of light like an aurora had closed in from up ahead and enveloped them. The ground shook fiercely, and just when that was settling down, a large Enemy materialized before their eyes. Retreating to the Rainbow Bridge was not an option, and while it was all fine and good that they had won when forced to fight, she was still unable to completely process the situation.

Niko turned her gaze back from the morning sun rising over Odaiba and blinked her large eye lenses again. “If this is the real-deal Unlimited Neutral Field, then it’s either a BB system bug or something—*someone* who deliberately made this happen, right?”

“It’s been eight years since Brain Burst started. I can’t believe there would still be such an enormous bug at this late stage. Most likely, it’s the latter.” Kuroyukihime let a certain situation play out in the back of her mind.

In Okinawa on her school trip, she had been in the Unlimited Neutral Field with the Acceleration Research Society’s Sulfur Pot when there was a sudden beam of light. A duel avatar she’d assumed was Megumi Wakamiya had appeared out of nowhere in the battlefield and changed the attribute of the stage using an incredible technique that artificially brought about the Change. Of course, changing the attribute of the Unlimited Neutral Field and changing the Territories stage *into* the Unlimited Neutral Field were phenomena on an utterly different scale. But the directionality was the same. And it was also very likely that Megumi had dived into this battlefield, too, probably as an Oscillatory member.

Was this astounding transition Megumi’s work? If that was the case, then was it something she had willed herself, or...

“Hey, Lotus!” Niko jabbed her in the side, and Kuroyukihime awoke from her reverie.

“Aah, apologies. This is not the time for deep thought.”

“ ’Zactly. That pink aurora looked like it was spreading out from the center of Minato Three. So it’s not just us. Pard and Crow and them musta got caught up in it, too.”

“And most likely, the Oscillatory Universe defense team, as well. We don’t know what could happen in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Let’s head for the center as planned. Crow and the others should be there.”

Nodding to each other, Kuroyukihime and Niko started to run along the deserted road, this time watching out for Enemies as they went.



This wasn’t the first time Chocolat Puppeteer, aka Shihoko Nago, had died in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Back when she’d only just made level four, she’d been carelessly walking around the unfamiliar field alone and stumbled across an Enemy. Of course, she’d tried to run away, but she’d taken one laser hit from

behind and immediately died with zero fanfare. She'd steeled herself then for the possibility of total point loss through an Unlimited EK.

During the hour she waited to be regenerated, she'd thought about all kinds of things and eventually decided that she had no other choice but to use her Chocopets as bait and try to flee. So once she regenerated, she activated her special attack Cocoa Fountain. But even though it was supposed to be attacking her, the Enemy had for some reason shown more interest in the chocolate pond. After sniffing at it for a while, it started to lap it up, and she'd managed to get away in the interim.

That lesser-class Enemy had been the Lava Carbuncle, Coolu, and while it had taken a long time, she was now Shihoko's good friend. Since Shihoko had never actively gone Enemy hunting after that, she'd only died in the Unlimited Neutral Field that one time.

Which is why she didn't know that dying with your comrades was such a difficult, painful, sad experience. In her field of view—black and white in her ghost state—fourteen death markers rotated quietly, including her own. Satomi and Yume and everyone else from Nega Nebulus would have also been transformed into ghosts like her, hanging about the area. What surprised her a little was that right before she had died, Magenta Scissor—Rui Odagiri—had tried to protect her, with her own body. It might have been an impulsive act, but Shihoko was quietly pleased by it. She wanted to thank her, but Rui's ghost also couldn't see or talk to her.

Around the cluster of markers, a thick wall of ice soared up high, created by the White Legion's executive member Glacier Behemoth's Incarnate technique Last Glacial Period. Shihoko and her friends from Petit Paquet had only been given a general overview of the existence and activation logic of Incarnate techniques, but she at least understood the underlying idea that if the imagination was severed, the ice wall would disappear. In other words, even though the fourteen members of Nega Nebulus had been wiped out, Behemoth was continuing to focus on the image.

She moved to the very edge of the ten-meter limit of movement away from her marker in the monochrome world. When she slipped through the ice wall with her immaterial avatar body, she saw the massive bulk of Glacier Behemoth

a little ways off. The ice-dragon avatar, which anyone would assume to be an Enemy if they didn't know better, had folded his arms and legs under him and was crouching down, eye lenses closed. He was probably closing off sensation and focusing solely on maintaining his Incarnate technique.

He wasn't alone. A small fairy-like avatar was standing on his head—most likely Snow Fairy, the second ranked of the Seven Dwarves—and she, too, had her eyes closed, not so much as twitching a finger in movement. She was also getting ready, so she could activate her terrifying, instant-death Incarnate technique Brinicle the instant Shihoko and her friends regenerated after an hour.

Having only recently made it to level five, Shihoko was anxious about how many Burst Points she had left. Her supply would probably dry up first out of the fourteen if the Unlimited PK kept going. Naturally, she was afraid of total point loss, but she had only just recently learned after joining Nega Nebulus that, when her Burst Points dropped to zero, not only would the Brain Burst program forcibly uninstall, but all of her memories related to the Accelerated World would also be erased. In other words, she might forget Haruyuki Arita and Kuroyukihime and the others who she'd only just become friends with—and maybe even Satomi and Yume, too. She absolutely hated that thought.

But at the moment, more than fear, it was the deep puzzlement of “why” that settled like a shroud over the heart of ghost Shihoko. She turned and walked back through the soundless world to her own marker.

And then she noticed a fifteenth death marker spinning off on its own toward the wall. It didn't belong to any member of Nega Nebulus. It was the marker of the Oscillatory Universe Burst Linker who had appeared suddenly inside the ice wall just as Snow Fairy's instant death technique was on the verge of exploding and used the Incarnate technique Imaginary Time to extinguish the abilities of all the Nega Nebulus members. He, too, had been caught up in Brinicle and died. And he likely intended to keep doing the same thing until the majority of the Nega Nebulus side were at total point loss.

Why...? What pushed them to go to such lengths? What were they trying to gain out of actions like producing the Armor of Catastrophe, spreading the ISS kits throughout the Accelerated World, and annihilating Nega Nebulus?

No matter how she turned this question over in her mind as she stood there in the gray world, Shihoko couldn't begin to understand the thinking of the White Legion and the Acceleration Research Society, given that she'd only just left the small box in which she'd been locked up for so long. But the one thing she could say with certainty was that she didn't want to lose like this. She was afraid of total point loss, but more than that, as a Burst Linker, she refused to let them just have their way with her.

She wouldn't give up; she would think about what she could do. At that very moment, Satomi and Yume and, of course, Fuko and Utai and everyone else had to have been doing the same thing. She crossed her semitransparent arms in front of her and took a wide stance, drawing herself up to her full height in an imposing way, and glared hard at the ice wall.



Fortunately, Kuroyukihime and Niko passed through the Shibaura Island area, slipped under the overhead Shinkansen and Yamanote train lines, and arrived in a spot near Sengakuji Temple—the center of Minato Area No. 3—without encountering any new Enemies. If the field had still been the Territories stage, the stronghold, the most critical point in the stage, would have sat within the grounds of Sengakuji. But since they hadn't found a single of the smaller footholds along the way, the stronghold was also likely gone.

In other words, there was no longer any need to occupy Sengakuji, so the members of both armies wouldn't necessarily be gathering there. But even so, the instant she caught sight of the roofs of templelike buildings up ahead, Kuroyukihime felt something akin to an electric shock at the nape of her neck, and her feet unconsciously came to a stop.

Niko also stopped next to her, as if repelled backward. Putting her right hand to the handgun on her hip, she produced a low, hoarse voice. "Some serious info presh here. Two—no, three of the Seven Dwarves are in there."

"And not only that. This feeling...Someone's using Incarnate techniques," Kuroyukihime murmured, glaring at the tall temples rising up on the other side of the low buildings.

The light of the dawn coming from behind got in the way, so she couldn't see

clearly, but there was an obvious pale-blue light shimmering upward like a mirage from the plaza at Sengakuji. She had no doubt that it was Incarnate overlay. And not Fuko's or Akira's or Utai's or anyone else on their team's.

"Someone on the Oscillatory Universe side's using Incarnate, huh," Niko said, even more quietly, apparently coming to the same conclusion. "But for all that, I can't sense the auras of Pard and the gang."

Kuroyukihime nodded silently. If the enemy was using Incarnate techniques, then that was because they were fighting Nega Nebulus, but no sound or light of battle, much less the auras of their comrades, reached them. An ominous feeling growing stronger inside her, she took a step forward. "We can't know the situation from here. We have to at least move to somewhere we can see the plaza."

"Yup," Niko replied briefly, and then she quickly scanned their surroundings before pointing toward a building standing on the west side of Sengakuji. "Let's climb that building. The walls are all slippery, so those Oscillatory Universe kids won't be looking there, either."

The buildings of the Demon City stage were impenetrable as a general rule, so if you wanted to get to the roof, your only option was to climb the walls. This was possible if there were some kind of indentations to use as handholds, but the exterior of the building Niko had selected was all smooth, exposed steel plates. Unless you had the ability to move along the surface of walls like Blood Leopard, it was essentially unclimbable.

"If they won't be watching it, that's all well and good. But how are we supposed to climb it?" Kuroyukihime asked.

The second Red King grinned and turned her back toward her for some reason.

"...What's that about?"

"Piggyback. Hurry up and get on."

Whaaaat?! She very nearly shouted but narrowly managed to hold the cry back.

"I said, hurry it up. Or would you rather I carried you in my arms?"

Left with no other choice, Kuroyukihime carefully straddled the back of the other, much smaller duel avatar. With two small hands, Niko grabbed hold of Kuroyukihime's legs and yanked her up.

"Mkay, here we go...Pyro Planing."

As she whispered the technique name, red flames wrapped around Niko's legs, and she began to race down the road at an incredible speed. The steel building looming up ahead drew closer with each breath. If they crashed into it with this much force, neither entity would make it out unscathed. Just when she was about to yell for the younger girl to put on the brakes, Niko jumped.

When her feet came into contact with the smooth surface of the wall, she dashed upward against the laws of gravity and climbed the twenty-meter wall in mere seconds, decelerating only slightly toward the end to sail over the perpendicular edge. She crouched down, and Kuroyukihime slid off her back, still hunched into herself.

When she peered down, two tracks remained on the wall and the surface of the earth, shining a bright red. These, too, quickly faded and disappeared. Most likely, this was a first-quadrant movement-expansion type of Incarnate technique, in which the flames on her feet melted the ground very slightly and allowed her to slide on top of the molten metal like skating. Kuroyukihime understood the rationale, but to run up a vertical wall took a fairly high level of overwrite.

"Have you always been able to use that technique?" she asked, pulling herself back upright.

"Yeah, but it's only lately that I've been practicing climbing walls," Niko replied. "Sixty percent success rate, so we got lucky here."

"You...No, never mind." Kuroyukihime shook her head and then turned her mind to the area ahead of them.

Since they were both crouching down, they still couldn't see the plaza at Sengakuji. They briefly made eye contact and then moved, their bellies pressed to the cold steel plates of the roof. When they reached the front edge and raised their heads just a little, the full spread of Sengakuji finally came into view.

Because it was a Demon City stage, the main gate and hall had been transformed into curious temples. But the main building had been smashed to pieces; there was no sign of it. The stronghold should have been in the plaza between the main gate and building, but she couldn't see it anywhere. It hadn't been destroyed, however. This was an effect of the field changing from the Territories stage to the Unlimited Neutral Field, as she'd guessed earlier.

In its place was a strange object in the center of the large space. A mountain of ice, transparent blue. Actually, it looked like the inside was a cave, so it was not a mountain but a tower perhaps. Ten meters or more around—and even taller than it was wide. The pale-blue overlay enveloping it was proof that it had been created through Incarnate.

And she instantly knew which Burst Linker had activated the Incarnate System. A frighteningly massive shadow was crouched quite close to the tower of ice. At first glance, it looked like a four-legged Beast-type Enemy, but it was not. This was the seventh of Oscillatory Universe's Seven Dwarves, Glacier Behemoth.

And a small Burst Linker was sitting on top of his head. Compared with the enormous beast avatar, she was ridiculously tiny, but her sense of presence was even greater than Behemoth's. The second of the Seven Dwarves, Snow Fairy.

Around the plaza, Kuroyukihime could identify twelve other human shadows. It appeared that the majority of Oscillatory Universe's territory defense team was gathered at Sengakuji.

Meanwhile, however, she couldn't see a single member of the Nega Nebulus attacking team. Were they gathered somewhere else and standing by? If that was the case, then they had to find out where.

That was when Kuroyukihime realized a large number of somethings were locked away inside the massive tower of ice.

All that made it through the thick wall was a variety of colors, but they were too small to be duel avatars. Was the brightness cycling regularly because they were spinning at a fixed speed? Some kind of item. Or maybe a marker...

Kuroyukihime gasped, and Niko shuddered beside her.

They were all Burst Linker death markers. Whose? No, it was obvious; they belonged to the newly born third Nega Nebulus's territory attacking team—to Sky Raker, Aqua Current, Ardor Maiden, Silver Crow, and the others. Oscillatory Universe had changed the Territories stage to the Unlimited Neutral Field, brought Raker and the others together in this plaza, and then eliminated them in one go with Incarnate techniques.

And not only that. Given that Behemoth continued to close the death markers off inside the ice wall—the *cage*—with Fairy standing by, they were planning to do the same thing again. The instant Nega Nebulus regenerated in an hour, they would kill them with Incarnate once more. Until every member of the attacking team lost all their Burst Points.

It had been a trap. Oscillatory Universe, no, the White King herself had foreseen Nega Nebulus's attack in the Territories and made meticulous preparations in order to completely annihilate the Legion and remove them from the Accelerated World forever.

Kuroyukihime's field of view was dyed a faint red, and the swords of both arms were trembling.

You'd probably say that the one who is caught in a trap is a fool, hmm? But in that case, you won't object if I do the same thing to you. You can't complain if I eliminate everyone here with Incarnate and take all their points in an Unlimited PK, Cosmos!!

Kuroyukihime was on the verge of leaping to her feet when Niko quickly caught the sword of her right hand. The passive ability Terminate Sword was always activated in the swords of Black Lotus's limbs—the manifestation of Kuroyukihime's mental trauma, of hurting everything by simply touching it. The sharp blade dug a few millimeters into Scarlet Rain's slender fingers, and a red damage effect like blood spilled out. But Niko didn't move to open her own small hand.

"Wait, Lotus," she said, hushed.

"I can't!" Kuroyukihime replied, barely keeping her voice down. "They're planning to drive Raker and the others to total point loss! And Leopard and the Triplex are in there. Niko, you—"

“Yeah. My blood’s boiling, too. But that’s exactly why you need to calm down for a sec!”

Scolded by a girl three years her junior, Kuroyukihime had no choice but to obey. She let out a long sigh, and the tension left her body.

Niko finally took her hand off the sword and turned her gaze back to the plaza. “Crow’s prob’ly not in there,” she said unexpectedly.

“Wh-what?” Kuroyukihime hurriedly peered into the ice cage.

The Incarnate-generated ice was nearly a meter thick, and the interior was only hazily visible. She could barely manage to see that there were some dozen or more death markers inside; she very much could not identify which one was whose. “How do you know that?”

“That ice’s open at the top.” Niko grinned. “A crow could just fly away.”

“N-now, look.” Kuroyukihime struggled with how exactly to retort to that logic.

Niko grew serious again as she continued, “And with my Vision Extension ability, I can visualize things like wind changes and heat sources and info pressure. The information pattern of death markers is unique, so that’s easier to identify than trying to see through that ice with my eyes. I can’t tell which marker is whose, but at the very least, I know there’s only fifteen of them in there. That’s for sure.”

“Fifteen...,” Kuroyukihime muttered, reconfirming the formation of the attack team in the back of her mind.

Three of Nega Nebulus’s Four Elements. With Crow, Bell, and Pile, that was six. Ten adding in the Petit Paquet group and Magenta Scissor. Sixteen with the Ash Roller group and the Triplex. And with the addition of Trilead Tetroxide, who had only become a Legion member that day, seventeen. If she excluded the Archangel Metatron, who she assumed would not have a death marker, it was true that there were indeed two missing.

“But how do you know that it was Crow who escaped?” Kuroyukihime asked before coming upon the answer on her own. “Oh, I see. To escape that Unlimited PK, one way would be to return to the real world through a portal

and pull everyone's Neurolinkers off their necks. In which case, that role would have been assigned to Crow, who can fly."

"That's the gist of it." Niko glanced up at Kuroyukihime before smiling faintly. "And, like, if you were locked up in there in this totally desperate situation, you'd have tried your damndest to get Crow out of there, logical or not, yeah? I'm pretty sure Pard or Raker would've done the same."

"Mm. That is true." She jabbed Niko lightly in the side as if to say the younger girl was no different and then turned her gaze up toward the dawn sky. "All of which means that Crow is currently moving toward a portal somewhere. But even if he did manage a lucky escape with no tail, it would take at least ten seconds for him to pull off everyone's Neurolinkers by himself, even if he did hurry. Ten seconds in the real world is nearly three hours in the Accelerated World. Which means we can expect that they will be hit another two times at the very least by this Incarnate attack."

"I don't think twice is gonna knock anyone down to total point loss," Niko said. "But we got just two other probs here, okay? The bike guy's buddies coming from GW to help—Bush Utan and Olive Grab, yeah? Weren't they supposed to join the Territories from a train or platform on the Yamanote Line?"

"Right. Crow can't force them to burst out then," Kuroyukihime replied. "And the second problem?"

"That one's simple. It's that you and I will have to stay hidden here like this and watch fifteen of our pals be killed two more times."

"You were the one who stopped me before," Kuroyukihime pointed out.

Niko snorted. "Doesn't change the fact that I was on the verge of explodin' myself. Can't say I can just sit here without chargin' in there if those guys actually try to kill Pard an' them."

"Nor can I." Kuroyukihime thought a moment. "If Crow succeeds in leaving, at the very least, one or two of the markers will disappear before everyone is regenerated. Let's wait first for that. If not a single marker disappears, then it means that Crow's escape has been obstructed. At that time..."

“We strike when Pard and the others regenerate. You’re good with that, yeah?”

“I’m good with that.” Kuroyukihime nodded again and took slow breaths, and let the tension slip out of her entire body. An incandescent rage still twisted and churned inside her duel avatar. She focused it all into a single point in her chest in time with her breathing and condensed it into a pale light.

If she was to be honest, she did actually want to leap down from the building that very second and go full throttle with a destructive Incarnate, ripping the members of Oscillatory Universe limb from limb. Despite knowing that if they fought back and she lost, she would end up trapped in an Unlimited PK together with Fuko and the others—or maybe it was precisely because of that.

But there were far too many unknowns at the moment. The fact that the entire Nega Nebulus attack team had made it into the stage meant that there should have been nineteen on the Oscillatory defense team. But in the plaza below, no matter which way she counted, there were only fourteen people. Which meant that the other five were somewhere other than Sengakuji. Was one of those people Megumi Wakamiya?

She met Megumi the day she started at Umesato Junior High. With the largest bounty in the Accelerated World on her head as a king killer, Kuroyukihime could only refuse when she was invited to a class party outside of school because she couldn’t connect to the global network, and she decided to stay at school until the final order to leave at the end of the day. However, she had plenty of things she needed to do. When she was walking around trying to get a handle on the positions of all the social cameras in the school, she came across Megumi in the library—or maybe Megumi had found her.

Kuroyukihime had bumped into her between the stacks, so with nowhere to run, she bowed lightly after confirming that the other girl was also in seventh grade and moved to pass by. But the girl with the fluffy hair grinned and started talking to her.

“Do you like real books, too?”

At the unexpected development, Kuroyukihime was a bit stuck even as she replied, “W-well, I don’t hate them.”

Her tone came from her Legion Master days, burned into her bones, and this apparently stimulated some specific neurons in the other girl. Megumi's smile grew even broader, and she invited Kuroyukihime to go talk in the lounge once they had borrowed paperbacks. Encouraged by the unexpected conversation, in the end, she agreed to meet the next day.

She found out a few days later that there was an unwritten rule that seventh graders were not permitted to use the Umesato lounge, but Megumi didn't show the slightest concern, boldly continuing to use it, albeit only after school. At some point, Megumi became Kuroyukihime's closest and basically only friend.

Of course, it would be a lie if she said she hadn't suspected the possibility that Megumi was an assassin sent by the Six Kings. After checking that Megumi was connected to the in-school net, she'd investigated the matching list—and not just once or twice. But no other name besides Black Lotus ever appeared there, and Kuroyukihime soon cast that doubt aside.

Without Megumi, Kuroyukihime's junior high life would have been extremely buttoned down, and she might not have run in the student council elections, either. It never got to the point where they were going to each other's houses, but the time they spent chatting at school or having tea and going shopping off school grounds after school was priceless to Kuroyukihime. For starters, it was Megumi who had given her the nickname Kuroyukihime, which was slightly embarrassing, but she still liked it anyway. There was no way this girl was an Oscillatory member who had originally approached her for the purposes of a day such as this.

But today, Saturday, July 20, after the closing ceremony and homeroom were over, Kuroyukihime had attended a student council meeting and chatted with Megumi for a bit before leaving the school and heading to the Arita house. Having known her for a long time, perhaps Megumi had picked up on Kuroyukihime's nervousness at the merger with Prominence and the decisive battle against Oscillatory. She may very well have figured out where she was going through some means and pursued her on the bus.

Was that what happened? Was Megumi Wakamiya an Oscillatory spy? Had she spoken to Kuroyukihime that day in the library two years earlier on the

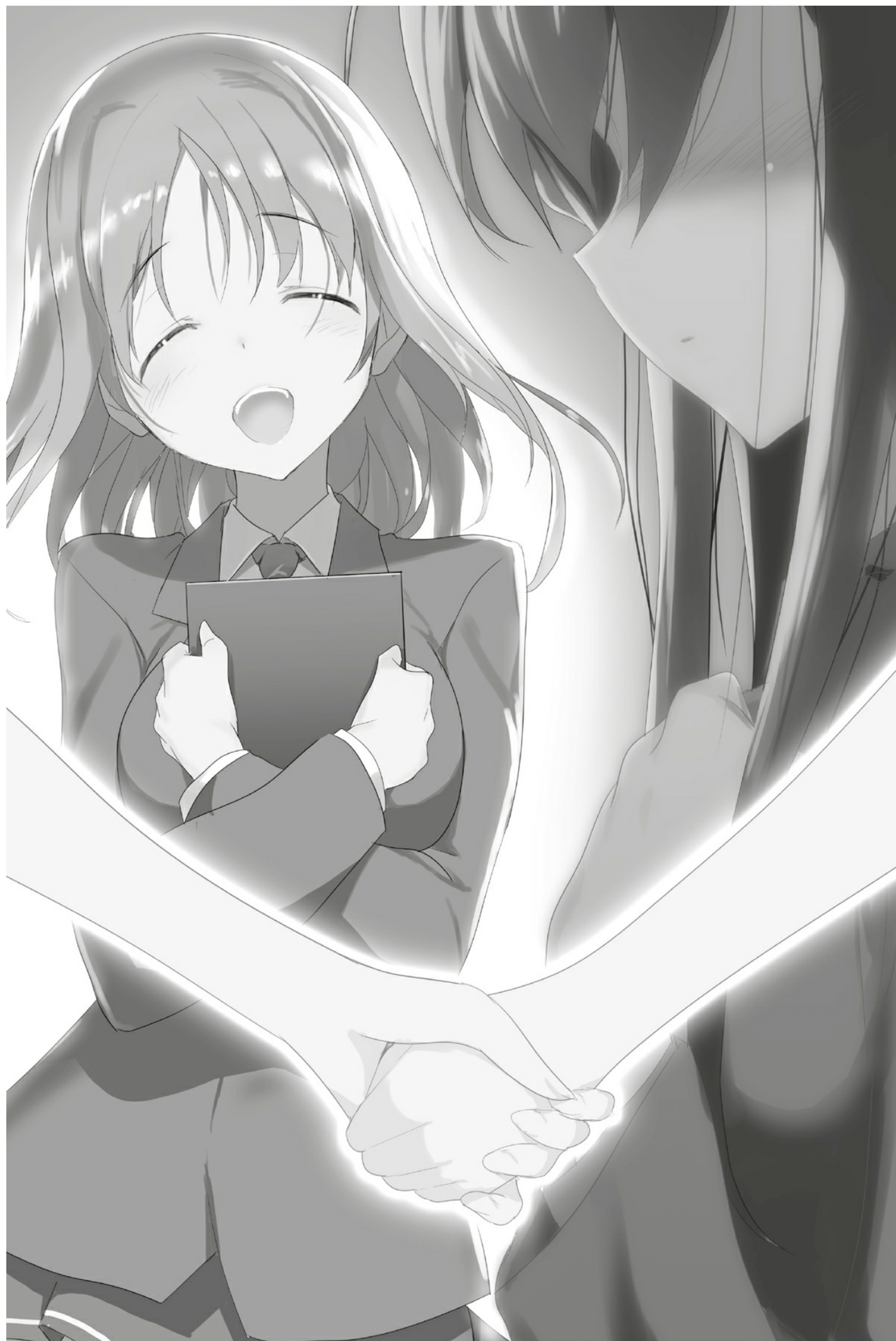
instruction of the White King and Kuroyukihime's own flesh-and-blood older sister, White Cosmos?

No!! Kuroyukihime shouted violently in her mind.

Even if Megumi was a Burst Linker capable of tricking the BB system the same way Cyan Pile once had, even if she was helping with the plan to annihilate Nega Nebulus that day, it absolutely wasn't out of her own free will. There had been tears in Megumi's eyes when she'd glimpsed her in the bus window.

Those tears were the truth. I believe that. So, Megumi...Hang on a little longer. I will destroy Oscillatory Universe and White Cosmos and set you free.

Holding her pale light in her heart, Kuroyukihime spoke to her friend, somewhere out on that battlefield.





Haruyuki flew just six hundred meters south from the roof of the large hotel rising up to the northwest of Shinagawa Station, avoiding the aggro area of the Hydra-type Enemy encamped in the plaza in front of the station and then landed for the time being. In the real world, the place was probably a large condo. The courtyard-type space was surrounded by excessively tall buildings, and strange monuments dotted the area. Chiyuri smashed these to charge up her special-attack gauge.

“Okay, here I go,” she said briefly, brandishing the handbell Enhanced Armament Choir Chime equipped on her left arm. When she swung it around, the clear sound of a bell rang out. “Citron Call!”

At the same time as she shouted the technique name, she brought down her arm toward Haruyuki and Trilead, who stood facing each other. The green light released from the bell enveloped them, rewound time, and healed Haruyuki and Lead where they’d been cut.

Lead looked over his own body, unable to hide his surprise, and Haruyuki took his hand off the other avatar’s shoulder, planting his newly restored foot firmly on the ground before nodding at the young woman.

“Thanks, Bell.”

“No biggie.” Chiyuri shook her head slightly and then added in a small voice, “I couldn’t do anything in the fight back there, so this is basically the least I could do to repay you.”

His ever-cheerful childhood friend sounded uncharacteristically glum, so Haruyuki unconsciously blinked a few times before hurrying to deny that. “That’s not true. I mean...If you’re gonna say you couldn’t do anything, then it was the same for me. If Lead hadn’t come along, we would definitely have been done for.” He remembered then that he hadn’t thanked his friend properly, and he bowed his head at the young samurai avatar as well. “Lead, thanks. You really saved us.”

“No...I only did what was natural. I, too, am a member of Nega Nebulus, after all.” There was no brightness in Lead’s face mask as he spoke, either. He

dropped his head, bangs swaying, and continued in a pained voice. “And...I watched from afar, hidden as you and Raker and all the others were annihilated by Incarnate techniques. I searched for the right time to come in and assist, but those holding the Sengakuji plaza left essentially no openings, so that, in the end, I left everyone to die.”

“Th-that’s not true!” Chiyuri shouted, even though she herself had only a few seconds earlier sounded similarly self-recriminating. “There were more than fifteen members of Oscillatory there. Even the Kings couldn’t have turned a situation like that around on their own. And because you held on there, you managed to save us. And, like...” She glanced at Haruyuki and asked in a small voice, “Who is this person? What does he mean when he says he’s part of Nega Nebulus?”

“Huh?” Blinking once again, Haruyuki finally realized that he, Kuroyukihime, and Fuko were the only ones who knew about Trilead joining the Legion, given his special circumstances and the fact that he would just barely make it in time for the Territories. “Oh, um. I think you know his name already. This is Trilead Tetroxide.” He looked next at Lead. “And this is Lime Bell. You met Metatron the other day, right?”

The 3-D icon on Haruyuki’s shoulder flapped her wings, and Lead bowed his head politely before turning to Chiyuri and extending his right hand.

“A pleasure to meet you. My name is Trilead Tetroxide. I’ve been permitted the honor of joining Nega Nebulus. It is the first time I’ve been a member of a Legion, so I’m sure there will be areas where I am less scrupulous. I would appreciate your kind instruction.”

At this extremely polite greeting, the likes of which were not heard in the Accelerated World, Chiyuri gaped for just two seconds before hurrying to shake his hand. “Oh! H-hi. I’m Lime Bell. The pleasure’s mine...Or, like...” She pulled her hand away, approached Haruyuki, and rattled on in a quiet voice, “Hey, Crow. Is this Trilead the Lead who lives in the Castle who you talked about before?! Wh-wh-why’s he suddenly joining up with us?!”

“It’s a long story. But you can totally count on him. You saw that fight just now, right?” Haruyuki replied, and then he realized something.

It was already obvious that Oscillatory Universe had anticipated Nega Nebulus's attack and made the most thorough preparations. They had readied a Burst Linker with the astounding power to force the Territories stage to change into the Unlimited Neutral Field, and they had gone so far as to lure large Enemies to all the nearby portals in order to block any escape to the real world in their plan to rob Haruyuki and his friends of all their points. On top of that, given the fact that nearly twenty people had been registered on the defending team, they had even taken into account Nega Nebulus's growth in numbers.

But no matter how meticulous they might have been, they couldn't have predicted that one pillar of the Four Saints, the Archangel Metatron, would be accompanying Haruyuki or that Trilead, bearer of the Arc of Infinity, would join the Legion immediately beforehand. In other words, Metatron and Trilead were perfect thorns in Oscillatory's mission to annihilate them. Metatron's knowledge and Trilead's armed might—as long as they had these, it might still be possible for them to turn the situation around even now.

The thought popped up abruptly in Haruyuki's mind, and he quickly pushed it aside. Right now, they had to reach a safe portal as soon as possible, return to the bus, and remove the Neurolinkers of Fuko and the others. If he flew south along the Tokaido Main Line, they would cross the Tama River in about ten kilometers and enter Kanagawa prefecture. He doubted Oscillatory would have placed a large Enemy all the way out in a spot like that.

"Metatron, how much time until everyone regenerates?" he asked the 3-D icon on his shoulder. It was possible for him to find out the total dive time by opening his Instruct menu, but it was faster to ask Metatron.

"Servant, I am not a time-measuring device," the icon replied, somewhat prickly, as she quickly did the math in her head. "...There are forty-seven minutes remaining."

"We still got a fair bit of time." He glanced up at the northern sky. He felt like ages had passed since they'd escaped Snow Fairy's Incarnate technique and shaken the pursuit of the ninja avatar, but the battle with the ninja had effectively been less than five minutes. He and the ninja were both optimized for speed and had fought in a super-high-speed battle, leaving his sense of time compressed.

But it was best to hurry. Even if they managed to succeed in returning to the real world, while they were yanking off Neurolinkers, that time would flow one thousand times faster in the Accelerated World.

“Okay, let’s go.” Turning back to the south, Haruyuki faced Chiyuri and Lead and stretched out his hands. Once again, he grabbed hold of each of them tightly, spread his wings, and took off.

As a secondary effect of Citron Call, the special-attack gauge he’d used up flying here was recharged to a certain degree. And today, at least, he had no reason not to fly with Incarnate power. Ignoring the issue of mileage, he was about to head south at maximum speed. However.

They hadn’t even flown a mere five hundred meters, nearing the border between Minato and Shinagawa, when Metatron suddenly shouted.

“You must stop, Crow!!”

“H-huh?!” As stunned as he was, he reflexively spread his wings and applied reverse thrust. Chiyuri cried out as she swung back and forth. And then Haruyuki saw it.

In the sky up ahead, an extremely faint light spread out in all directions, shimmering like an aurora. The sense of presence he got from it was infinitesimally weak, but he instinctively understood that it was something he shouldn’t go slamming into at top speed.

“Nnnnnnggggh,” he groaned as he put the brakes all the way on. But the inertia of the three people was not negated, and Haruyuki hit the aurora dead on at a speed of about ten kilometers per hour.

Ptan!

“Hngah!” Chiyuri moaned.

“Nngh!” Lead cried.

Stuck to a nearly transparent wall, they started to slither down to the ground. Haruyuki applied reverse thrust one more time and managed to somehow land without any damage. After checking that Chiyuri and Lead were okay, he looked at his own recently rewound health gauge to find it had dropped, albeit only by

a few pixels. If they'd crashed at full speed, it would have been catastrophic. Unconsciously, he let out a sigh of relief, but this was definitely not the time nor the place to relax.

"What is a wall doing here?" he muttered, bringing his hand up to the pink aurora.

It was so thin, he could see through it to the other side almost perfectly clearly, yet it was inviolably hard. He instantly knew that they could not break it no matter how many times they kicked or punched or attacked with weapons. It wasn't quite a material strength, however. He didn't feel a wall touching his fingertips, but more like a disconnect that rejected all interference.

"Is this an area boundary?" Chiyuri asked.

"Yeah, it sure feels like it." Haruyuki nodded. "But why is there an area boundary in the Unlimited Neutral Field? And it should be the middle of Shinagawa area, anyway."

"To be more precise, it is two kilometers, Servant," Metatron said suddenly.

"T-two kilometers?" Haruyuki cocked his head to one side. "From where?"

"From the center point of the large-scale space change generated in the Mean Level."

Haruyuki gasped and looked back suddenly. The steel buildings blocked his view, but two kilometers to the north was Sengakuji Temple—or more precisely, a single building standing on the north side of Sengakuji. Exactly two kilometers from the place where the mysterious Burst Linker had appeared and forced the change to the Unlimited Neutral Field with an Incarnate technique. That's what Metatron was saying.

"This wall...That Burst Linker made it?" Haruyuki asked.

"Rather than an obstructing wall produced deliberately, it is more likely that the range affected by the space change stops at this point," Metatron corrected him. "This is at most a supposition, but the little warrior you saw is overlaying the Mean Level on the Low Level with Incarnayte. The range of this effect is a perfect circle of a radius of two kilometers, and there, the space logically severed. I suppose it's something like that, hmm?"

“In which case,” Trilead said in a serious tone. He turned his wise-looking face mask toward Haruyuki. “That means that this Burst Linker continues to activate this Incarnate technique even at the present moment. To maintain this kind of phenomenon requires incredible concentration. If we attack and disrupt that concentration...”

“The shift to the Unlimited Neutral Field will be canceled?!” Chiyuri shouted, and Lead nodded wordlessly.

After a moment, Metatron flashed her small angel halo briefly. “It *is* possible. However, in that case, naturally, the people from Oscillatory Universe would also be aware of this. They would have quite the solid defense prepared.”

“On top of Behemoth and Fairy, there are more than fifteen uninjured Oscillatory members at Sengakuji. To charge into that would be...” *Difficult.* Haruyuki swallowed the word.

He couldn’t break the wall of light before his eyes. The field might as well have ended in that place. And the portals that existed within the two-kilometer radius inside the wall would have Beast-class or higher Enemies guarding them without exception. Put another way, it was precisely because they could limit the range that Oscillatory had taken action to block the portals with Enemies.

There was only one way now to rescue Fuko and the others from Unlimited PK. Just like Lead said, they would have to attack the Burst Linker who shifted them to the Unlimited Neutral Field and interrupt her Incarnate technique. But was it even possible to get close to this Burst Linker without being discovered? To start with, they didn’t even know her current location. How could he ever apologize to Fuko and the others after they worked so desperately to get Haruyuki out of the ice cage if he bet everything on a reckless surprise attack and failed?

The instantaneous power of thought that he’d been training wasn’t working at all now, and he simply stood there stock-still.

And then on his shoulder, the Archangel Metatron spoke in a voice colored ever so slightly with hesitation, although that could’ve just been in his mind. “There is just one means remaining to break through the Oscillatory Universe guard.”

“Huh?” Haruyuki’s eyes widened in surprise, and the icon floated up to stop directly in the center of the three Burst Linkers, her halo blinking irregularly as she began to explain. “This space severance spreads out in a circular shape of a radius of two kilometers centered on the shrine that you call Sengahkugee. The south side extends to here. In which case, do you know where the north side extends to, Servant?”

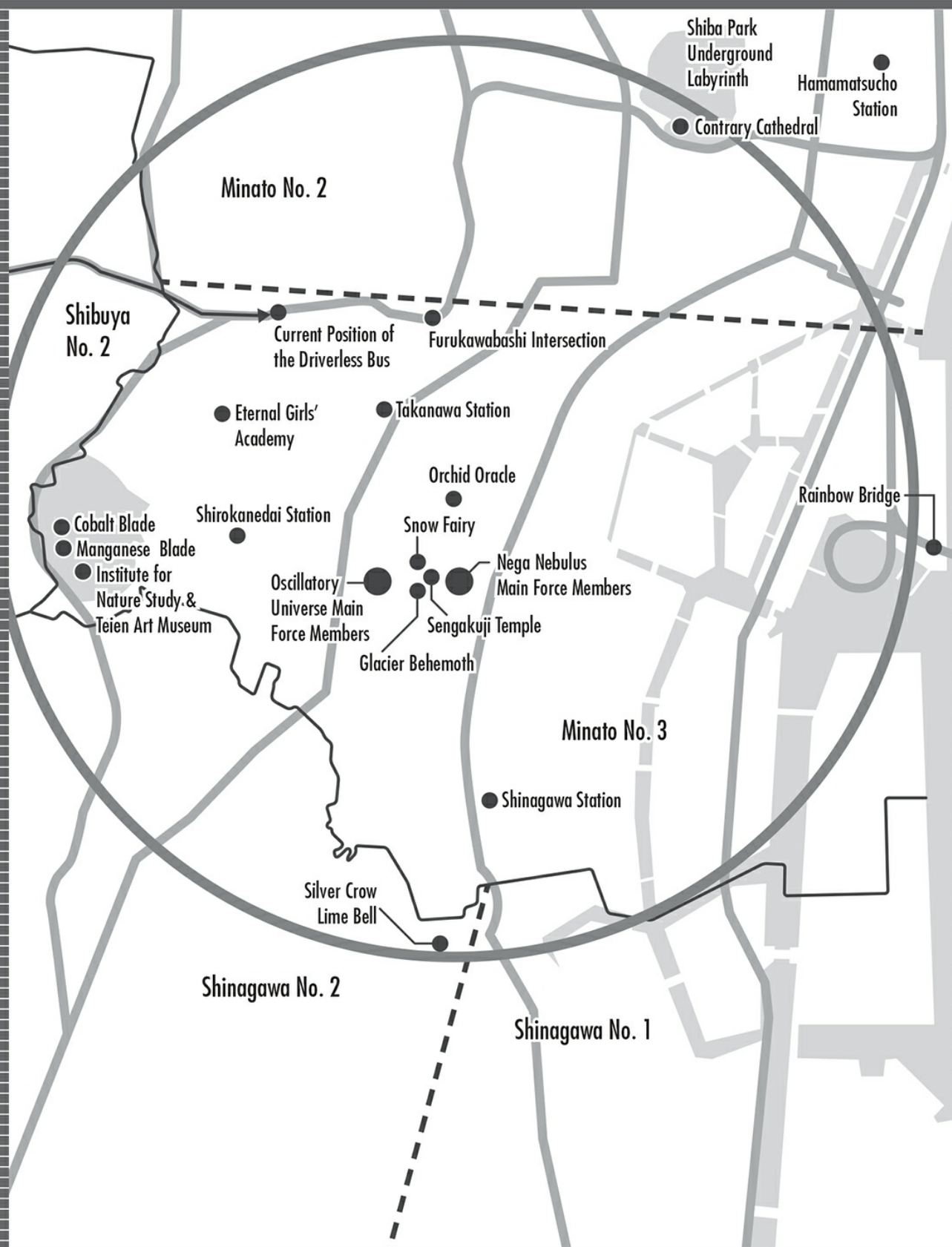
“Huh? The north?” Still not understanding where this was going, he opened the map of Minato Ward that he had so desperately memorized.

If they went north from Sengakuji, there was Sakurada-dori, the street they had once used as a catapult on the mission to rescue Ardor Maiden. On the other side of that was the Mita campus of a certain famous private university. And beyond that...

“Oh! Shiba Park?” At this from Haruyuki, Lead cocked his head slightly to one side, but Chiyuri gasped.

“Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth!”

“Exactly.” The small icon nodded solemnly.



“According to my calculations, the gate to my palace, Contrary Cathedral, is just barely within the two-kilometer range. If, hypothetically, the space severance extends underground, then you won’t be able to go farther than that. However, in terms of the BB system, all the dungeons are a separate space from the aboveground. If you can simply make it through the gate, there is a possibility that you can reach the deepest level of the palace.”

“I-is there something on the deepest level, Metacchi?” Chiyuri asked.

Who are you calling Metacchi?!

But rather than erupting in anger, the Archangel replied, “It’s obvious. My main body, the Being Metatron.”

Haruyuki and his friends moved east along the aurora wall and climbed up to the overhead tracks of the Tokaido Main Line before heading north toward Shiba Park. The overhead line was bracketed in soundproofing steel, so if he flew just barely above the tracks, they wouldn't be visible from the ground. They'd also considered going via the Chuo Shinkansen tunnel that ran parallel underground, but if they encountered a large Enemy down there, they would have nowhere to run. Holding Lime Bell and Trilead in his arms, Haruyuki flew at what was essentially top speed.

"Servant, it is forty-one minutes and forty seconds until the regeneration of Sky Raker and the others," Metatron said coolly.

"Th-thanks. But that's a weird number to—," he started, then quickly understood. "Oh, so twenty-five hundred seconds?"

"To be precise, there are two thousand four hundred ninety-one seconds left."

"...Gr-great." He thanked her again and increased his flight speed slightly. When she said forty minutes, he felt like they had a decent amount of time, but 2,500 seconds felt like it would fly by in the blink of an eye. Human perception of time was a strange thing.

But for Metatron, who was an AI, one second was always one second—unchanging information generated by the real-time clock IC of the Brain Burst central server somewhere in Japan. And this was accelerated a thousand times faster than the real world. During a day Haruyuki spent in the real world, a period of a thousand days would pass for Metatron. She herself often said that this amount of time was like a "moment's slumber," but he wondered if that were really the case. She had been given an extremely precise sense of time, so

wouldn't a day, a month, a year be something longer and further out than anything Haruyuki had experienced?

Once this fight was over, he would stay for as long as he could in the Mean Level and talk to Metatron about all kinds of things. So resolved, he focused his mind on what was ahead.

The overhead tracks curved hard to the right just ahead of Tamachi Station on the parallel Yamanote Line. Instead of turning along with it, he flew straight ahead, crossing the soundproofing wall, and charged down Sakurada-dori.

"Ah!" Chiyuri cried out quietly from his left arm. She pointed straight ahead.

At the end of the road stretching out in a straight line, an iron tower bathed in the morning sun, red like blood, significantly taller than the surrounding buildings. The tip of the tower was invisible, a construction of complicated trusses swallowed up by the low clouds of the Demon City stage.

"That's the old Tokyo Tower!" she cried.

"This is the first time I've ever seen the old Tokyo Tower so close up in the Accelerated World," Lead said from Haruyuki's other arm.

"Right." Chiyuri frowned slightly. "I guess it must look teensy from the Castle."

"Yes. I've always wanted to go see it someday."

As he listened to them talk, Haruyuki narrowed his eyes at the tip of the structure. Hidden there were Fuko's player home, given the name Fufuan, and a portal. For all their cunning, he couldn't imagine that the White Legion had managed to place an Enemy at a height of 333 meters aboveground, but unfortunately, the old Tokyo Tower was outside the wall of light.

They flew straight along Sakurada-dori, slipped under the expressway overpass, and turned right onto Gaien Higashi-dori when a vast space appeared before his eyes. Shiba Park, surrounded by rows of tall trees in the real world.

"I'm going down!" Haruyuki warned his companions before spreading his wings to decelerate, coming down to land on the tiled road.

The plaza on the north side of the road was surrounded by a steel fence, the tips pointed like lances, and a severe gate opened up in one place. The interior

was blocked by a thick fog; he couldn't really see anything.

"This is...Shiba Park," he murmured.

"If the field attribution was Holy or Earth, it would be more beautiful," Metatron responded. "But at the moment, how it looks is of no concern."

She was exactly right. He met the eyes of Chiyuri and Lead and then slipped through the gate ahead of them. The white fog quickly pressed in and blocked his field of view. He sensed that a ponderously large creature was roaming about somewhere deep in the fog.

"It's like, it feels like there could be a scary Enemy in there," Chiyuri muttered, and Lead reached a hand out to the greatsword on his hip. But they didn't have the time to be out hunting extra Enemies.

"Metatron, where's the dungeon gate?" he asked.

"It is in a position fifty-seven meters ahead." She indicated the northeast with her small, sharp wings. He nodded, and then they advanced at a trot, careful of their surroundings.

Fortunately, they made it without being attacked by any Enemies. From the other side of the mist, a construction appeared that could only be described as a gate, just as Metatron had said. The thick steel door rose up supported by pillars designed to look like countless standing blades. It was probably around five meters tall. He'd seen all kinds of doors in the Accelerated World, but the scale of this one was the largest—excluding, of course, the four gates of the Castle. And immediately behind the door, not more than ten meters away, a pale-peach aurora shimmered. They were just inside the wall, but Haruyuki didn't have the luxury of wondering about that now.

This was one of the four Great Dungeons, the entrance to the Shiba Underground Labyrinth. He stood stock-still, struck by a deep fear.

"What are you standing around for?" Metatron beat at his head with her wings. "There are only thirty-five minutes left, Servant."

"Oh...R-right." Haruyuki nodded at Chiyuri and Lead and then walked over to the gate, reaching out to the double doors with both hands. *Krr-krr-krr...* The ground shook as the doors swung open to reveal a massive set of stairs leading

down. He shivered unconsciously at the cold wind that blew up.

Trilead advanced to stand next to him and spoke in a hushed voice, “The pressure is on par with that of the Castle main building.”

“It really is...”

Was it truly possible for just the three of them to charge through this, the most difficult of dungeons, and in thirty minutes or less? He couldn’t help but wonder. Still, they had no choice. The Legend-class Enemy Archangel Metatron was their only hope.

“Okay, let’s go!” Chiyuri shouted, giving the other two a push from behind.

Haruyuki nodded, a little relieved that she seemed to have cheered up again, and stepped onto the massive steel staircase.

The Accelerated World’s four great dungeons: Bunkyo’s Tokyo Dome Underground Labyrinth, Chiyoda’s Tokyo Station Underground Labyrinth, the Shinjuku Government Building Underground Labyrinth, and Minato’s Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth. There had apparently been a time in the early days of Brain Burst when Shibuya’s Yoyogi Park Underground Labyrinth counted among their number, and they had been known as the five great dungeons, but Yoyogi had been sealed off, and Haruyuki had never heard of anyone visiting it now.

All four of the great dungeons had a powerful Legend-class Enemy as the last boss, and these were known as the Four Saints. They were deemed to be a lower rank than the Four Gods, the Super-class Enemies who guarded the four gates of the Castle, and in fact, all Four Saints had been subjugated by the Legion kings. But Haruyuki knew that they hadn’t done the complete play-through. The Four Saints had a first form, a massive Enemy, and a second form, a humanlike body; and so far, no one had ever conquered the second form.

Taking Metatron as an example, in the Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth—formally known as Contrary Cathedral—by stepping on certain panels, you could change the dungeon attribute from Heaven to Hell. In the Hell stage, Metatron’s first form was greatly weakened, and it was possible to defeat her with a large party of high rankers, but her second form wouldn’t appear like that. You could only be said to have completely subjugated Metatron for the first time when you defeated her first form without leaning on the power of the

Hell stage and then defeating the second form that appeared after that—her true form. But there wasn't a single Legion who had accomplished that.

Haruyuki prayed from the bottom of his heart that no one would even come to challenge Metatron's second form. As an Enemy, she would regenerate with the next Change if she was conquered, but that would be an entirely new individual, with eight thousand years of memories and thought processes all reset. If the Metatron here now died, she wouldn't come back again.

These thoughts occupied one corner of his mind as he raced into the most difficult dungeon in the Accelerated World because the master of this palace was neutralizing the Enemies that appeared.

"Servant, a principality type is approaching from the front."

Hearing Metatron's warning, Haruyuki stopped moving. Chiyuri and Lead behind him also froze.

The interior of the dungeon was fixed at a Heaven stage, regardless of the stage attribute aboveground, and the labyrinth had the appearance more of a shrine. The walls and floor were snowy-white marble, and exquisite sculptures were carved out of platinum pillars, while a crystal chandelier emitted a clean light.

The wide path curved to the right up ahead, and clanging metal footsteps drew nearer from the other side. What finally revealed itself was a massive human-type Enemy, a pair of white wings on its back, its body wrapped in bluish metal armor—an angel. It held a sword aloft, reflecting the dazzling light of the chandelier.

The angel Enemy had no sooner discovered Haruyuki and his friends than white flames leapt to life in its eyes deep in its helmet. It spread its wings and opened its mouth to shout.

However.

"Soldier of mine, sheathe thy sword!"

Haruyuki heard Metatron shout in his mind, and the light in the angel's eyes faded while the wings folded back up.

“אדונים הבנתי” it replied with a strange sound, starting to walk once more, passing right by Haruyuki and his friends and disappearing behind them.

This was the ninth time that Metatron had diverted an Enemy for them, but even so, they still breathed a sigh of relief.

Chiyuri looked up at the small icon. “B-b-b-but it sure is handy to go against the rules, huh? If we had you with us, Metacchi, we could take out any dungeon, couldn’t we?”

“Lime Bell. Because of the extenuating circumstances, I will allow this ‘Metacchi,’ but I will not tolerate being treated like a convenient option, yes?” She immediately continued in a smooth, quick speech that seemed very un-AI-like. “And the fact that all the Beings accept my control is because this is my domain. Outside, I can only barely manage to control what you call the Wild class. And in a labyrinth where there is a master, my control is further weakened. If there is somewhere you would like to challenge, you will have to attempt it under your own power.”

Chiyuri clicked her tongue.

Haruyuki grinned wryly at the exchange, listening to the lazy student and the strict teacher before interrupting. “Okay, we better hurry up. Metatron, how much farther until the boss—I mean, the throne room?”

“At this pace, it shouldn’t take more than five minutes. And there are seventeen minutes left until Sky Raker and the others regenerate.”

“Good...” Nodding, he started to run down the corridor once more.

Flying at top speed, it wouldn’t take Haruyuki more than a minute to cross the distance from Shiba Park to Sengakuji. Taking into consideration the time they’d need to exit the dungeon, they would just barely make it—no, they *had* to make it.

But this was only if everything went exactly as planned. You never knew what was going to happen in the Accelerated World, especially the Unlimited Neutral Field. He could count on one hand the number of times things had gone exactly as planned.

Chiyuri had been deliberately pretending to be cheerful for a while now, but

that was the flip side of her anxiety. In seventeen—well, sixteen—minutes, everything would be decided. Would they rescue Fuko, Utai, Takumu, and the others? Or would Haruyuki and his friends here also be caught in the Unlimited PK trap and would Nega Nebulus be annihilated?

...No.

Even if it came to that, the Black King and the Red King were safe. Kuroyukihime and Niko would gather up the members of the former Prominence who were on defense in Suginami and Nerima and rebuild Nega Nebulus into something magnificent. And then, someday, they would crush the conspiracy of the White Legion and the Acceleration Research Society.

Pushing this fleeting thought down deep, Haruyuki ran faster. He had to focus on the mission before him now: to rescue his comrades from a death trap with the combined power of Trilead and Metatron, two people that Oscillatory couldn't have planned for.

At the end of the curving path, there was a wide set of stairs going down. He instinctively knew that the last boss room was at the bottom.

Normally, players would have to solve puzzle gimmicks on three floors and defeat three middle bosses to get this far. But Metatron told them the solutions to the puzzles and neutralized all the middle bosses. If they'd taken a more offensive approach, this most difficult of dungeons would have taken half a day, yet they'd managed to slip through it in a mere twenty minutes. It had to have been upsetting for Metatron to have the dungeon she ruled over so easily penetrated. He had to muster up all his might in the last battle for her, too, for her having allowed them to do this.

Firming up his resolve, he raced down the stairs, and a remarkably splendid silver door came into view.

"Beyond that is the throne room," Metatron said.

"Roger," he replied, exchanging firm nods with Chiyuri and Lead on either side.

They'd already confirmed any number of times along the way what would happen after they opened the door, but that definitely didn't mean he wasn't

nervous. If they made a single mistake, they might all end up in an Unlimited EK and never make it to Sengakuji. But they couldn't turn back now.

“Okay. Here we go!” Haruyuki shouted, shoving the silver door open.



Magenta Scissor, aka Rui Odagiri, kept staring silently at the death marker spinning before her eyes. Not hers, but Chocolat Puppeteer's.

In the ghost state, she could only see the colors of the death markers as differing shades of gray, so it was impossible to identify all the owners of the fourteen markers clumped together there. But she was sure that the one in front of her was Chocolat—Shihoko's. Because the instant she had died, swallowed up by the super-cold tornado, Rui had stepped in front of Shihoko and tried to protect her.

But she couldn't. The Incarnate vortex of icy air had pushed mercilessly through the gaps between Rui's arms and frozen Chocolat a solid white. The slender avatar had shattered to pieces a heartbeat later, and Rui had screamed, hit with an anger and sadness that surprised even her. At nearly the same time, Mint Mitten and Plum Flipper also scattered on the wind.

Mere seconds later, Rui's health gauge dropped to zero, but she felt far more regret when Chocolat and her friends died. It had probably been more than forty minutes since then, but the pain in the chest of her transparent avatar showed no signs of abating.

It had only been a month earlier that Rui had attacked Chocolat's junior high school in the Unlimited Neutral Field. She'd used her scissors on a resisting Mint and Plum, forcibly parasitized them with ISS kits, and tried to do the same to Chocolat. Maybe after having done such a thing, she had no right to try to protect them now or to lament the fact that she couldn't.

But after Chocolat had given her a very earnest explanation of the situation, she had joined Nega Nebulus and met with them in the real. While they talked, a feeling and a resolve that she herself hadn't expected had grown inside of Rui. From now on, she would give everything she had to protect the three girls she had hurt so deeply once.

“Choco.” Lifting her face, Rui started talking to the ghost of Shihoko, who had to have been somewhere nearby. “I know you probs can’t hear me, but let me say this now, okay? Thanks...for forgiving me.”

When she thought about it objectively, there was a not-insignificant possibility that Rui, Shihoko, Satomi, and Yume—and Fuko and the rest of the main Nega Nebulus force—would be driven to total point loss in that place. If they kept riding the bus in the real world, someone would likely try to stop their full dive at some point, but not only was the bus automatic, it was on a circular route. It probably went to the bus yard late at night, and nearly a year of time would pass in the Unlimited Neutral Field by then. A quick calculation told her that Oscillatory could kill Shihoko and the others six or seven thousand times during that period.

The lone ray of hope was that Silver Crow and Lime Bell had escaped the ice cage. If they went back to the real world and pulled everyone’s Neurolinkers off their necks, the group could escape the imminent danger of total point loss for the time being. But given that Oscillatory Universe had prepared such a large and elaborate trap, she couldn’t imagine they hadn’t considered just such a situation. They were probably blocking escape through the portals somehow. She couldn’t just pray for Crow to save them; she had to think of what she could do.

In another fifteen minutes or so, Rui and the others would regenerate. In that moment, Brinicle would likely come down upon them again, but there had to be just one thing she could do at least.

Rui crouched down on top of ice that didn’t feel cold at the moment, touched Chocolat’s death marker with her immaterial hands, and kept on thinking.



Mihaya Kakei lifted her face, feeling like she’d suddenly smelled something familiar.

There was no new movement in the monochrome world. The twelve Oscillatory Universe members locking down the Sengakuji grounds, along with Glacier Behemoth and Snow Fairy standing by to launch their next Incarnate attack, all continued to silently fulfill their individual roles. They might have

been the enemy, but she had to commend their focus.

To start with, she was in a ghost state, so her sense of smell shouldn't have been working. Still, she felt like it was just the faintest hint, but the air that was neither hot nor cold contained a whiff of something bittersweet. Like glazed strawberries...

"Niko?" Mihaya looked around the field once more. There was no way Niko—the Red King—was there. She'd gotten off the bus with the Black King and gone back to Suginami.

However.

There was a nonzero possibility that something unexpected had happened, and Niko and Kuroyukihime had come after Mihaya and the others. And that they'd entered Minato Area No. 3 without having caught up to them and dived into the Territories stage. If that were the case, then they would have also been dragged into the Unlimited Neutral Field. What would they do when they found out that Mihaya and the others had been wiped out by Incarnate techniques?

It was obvious. She knew without a doubt that they would launch a special attack timed with her next regeneration. Despite the fact that they would have known that if their surprise attack failed, they would also be caught in the Unlimited PK trap.

No, this was all in Mihaya's head. The fear of forgetting the Accelerated World, Blood Leopard, and even Niko, if she lost all her points, was making her sense a fragrance that couldn't have been there. But on the other hand, Burst Linkers had to be ready for anything.

Mihaya hadn't anticipated the possibility that the White Legion would set up such a meticulous trap. Unable to instantly deal with the move to the Unlimited Neutral Field, imprisonment in the ice cage, and the Incarnate technique to cancel other Incarnate techniques, she had, as a result, allowed the team to be wiped out. As one of the two level eighters, she had a responsibility to guide her comrades, but she hadn't been able to do anything.

She would not stop thinking about what was going to happen next, when regeneration came for them in fifteen minutes, and she would absolutely strike a blow at the White team. She started to think single-mindedly about any and

all things in the realm of possibility.



Beyond the silver door was a large, resplendent hall like the most exalted palace of the gods in an RPG—and in a sense, it was precisely that. The floor was pure-white tile inlaid with gold. Massive snowy pillars ran along the walls, stone statues of angels in between. The main feature of the arched ceiling was stained glass, and the light pouring in created a cold, imposing atmosphere.

“Holy smokes! So *this* is your room, huh, Metacchi?” Chiyuri said, starting to move forward, so Haruyuki hurriedly grabbed the brim of her pointed hat and yanked her back. “Nngh! What’re you doing? There’s nothing here!”

Just as she said, there was no Enemy in the large hall likely twenty meters wide and a hundred meters deep. There was a space that could have been called an altar up a step higher along the wall at the opposite end, but it appeared to be completely deserted.

However.

“No, there is, though,” Haruyuki muttered in a hoarse voice, staring at the altar in the gloom.

There was nothing resembling a throne there, but a black dais stood alone directly ahead. Most likely, this was where the Arc, The Luminary, had once sat. The light pouring down on the area through the stained glass shimmered faintly, carving out a complicated silhouette. Or so he felt.

“Indeed, something is there.” Lead sounded similarly tense. “But it’s too...”

Too big.

Even if the words didn’t make it out of his mouth, they came through loud and clear. In the back of Haruyuki’s mind, the words of the Green Legion’s Iron Pound came back to life.

That Archangel Metatron has the totally annoying status of being invisible with a sudden-death attack and impermeable to all attribute damage.

Just as Pound had said, Metatron’s first form could not be seen with the naked eye outside of a Hell stage, and none of their physical or energy-type

attacks would hit it. But it would come back at them with a succession of superpowerful ranged attacks.

Likely remembering the time they had fought it at Tokyo Midtown, Chiyuri inched backward. She looked up at the 3-D icon riding on Haruyuki's head and said quietly, "But that's your body, right, Metacchi? Can't you make it play nice like the angels?"

"Unfortunately, that is not my body, but instead something that would be akin to an Enhanced Armament for you, or perhaps a moving prison. Once it detects an enemy, it starts to fight automatically and does not stop until the enemy is eradicated. Unlike other Beings, it does not have a spirit. Thus, with my true self currently dormant, I cannot control it," Metatron explained smoothly, though Haruyuki sensed the faintest trace of tension in her voice.

To heal the wounds she'd received in the fierce battle with the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, Metatron's true form was asleep inside the first form. The 3-D icon was at best nothing more than a terminal projected there for show through the information link with Haruyuki. The icon could take any kind of attack, and there would be no damage to Metatron herself.

So if she was nervous, then it was because she was concerned about Haruyuki and his friends falling into Unlimited EK there. The Archangel Metatron, one of the most powerful Enemies/Beings in the Accelerated World, was also an upstanding member of Nega Nebulus now.

"We'll be okay." He reached a hand up to his head and gently held the 3-D icon. "We won't lose. And then we'll smash open the White Legion's trap."

She usually immediately got angry with him—"The nerve of you, a servant!"—but she didn't react vocally. Instead, he felt in his palm a warmth like a heartbeat.

He brought his hand down and asked in his mind again, one last time, "*Metatron. How healed is your true form?*"

After a brief pause, her voice echoed in his mind. "*There is no need for concern. I have reached a state in which there is no obstacle to my awakening.*"

"...Got it." He wanted to ask for details, but he held that thought back.

Ever since Metatron had barely managed to escape complete annihilation, he'd been thinking he had to prevent someone from coming along and attacking the Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth and defeating her first form without the assistance of the Hell stage. But he never dreamed that he himself would be taking on that challenge before he could come up with a specific plan. He knew that this was the only way they would be able to rescue Fuko and the others. But he hesitated to awaken Metatron's true form before she was completely recovered.

Metatron protected me before. That's why I'll protect her this time, no matter what. Even up against the Seven Dwarves...or the White King herself.

Resolving himself, Haruyuki turned his gaze to Chiyuri and Lead. They both nodded sharply in return. They didn't need words anymore.

Facing forward, Haruyuki leapt across the marble tile of the hall and into the aggro range of Metatron's first form. Nothing happened right away. But once he had run about ten meters, there was a change not at the altar in the back, but along the walls to both sides.

The stone angel statues in between the pale pillars flashed and began to move with a ponderous sound. The so-called minions of the last boss, Virtue-type Enemies. Their number: thirty.

"Stop right there!!" Metatron's icon gave the fierce order as white light jetted from it. Any angel touched by the light creaked to a stop. But it wasn't perfect. Perhaps still under the control of the first form to a certain extent, they fought the restraint, strange sounds coming out of their mouths.

Normally, this would be where he stopped momentarily to dispatch the minions. But Haruyuki continued to run straight ahead without thinking about what would happen if Metatron's order was overturned.

Once he had advanced thirty meters, he noticed a black tile in just one place on the floor up ahead to the right. If he stepped on it, the attribute within the dungeon would change from Heaven to Hell and the transparent first form would become visible. But he couldn't use the assist from the system this time. Ignoring it, he ran on and then stopped when he had crossed the fifty-meter line.

“Here it comes!” Haruyuki shouted as the transparent shadow in front of the altar moved. He felt invisible eyes glaring at him, and a shiver of fear raced up the spine of the avatar body beneath his armor.

Lead took up a position to his immediate right and drew the straightsword The Infinity on his hip. Haruyuki crossed his arms and readied for the attack. Behind them, Chiyuri brandished the bell of her left arm up high.

“It’s coming!” Metatron shouted.

A pure-white glimmer sparkled in the center of the massive shadow drawn out hazily in the refraction of the light. Silver Crow’s forearm armor opened up to either side, and a transparent optical guidance crystal pushed up from within. Trilead readied his blade horizontally with both hands.

The world was dyed white. The Archangel Metatron’s most powerful long-distance attack, the angel fire Trisagion.

The superlarge-diameter laser had evaporated so many duel avatars, and now it was met by Haruyuki with his crossed arms and Trilead with his straightsword. They shouted at the same time.

“Optical Conduction!!”

“Genuine Specular!!”

Haruyuki’s Optical Conduction was an ability, so there was no need to shout the technique name, but he did need to get an assist from the Incarnate System to resist Metatron’s main armament. Meanwhile, Lead’s Genuine Specular was a purely Incarnate technique. Their overlays merged to become a massive shield and stop Metatron’s laser. Heat and light exploded and churned at the point of contact, making the air itself shake.

When he’d tried to avoid Trisagion with his newly acquired Optical Conduction at Tokyo Midtown, Haruyuki hadn’t been able to withstand the pressure and had gradually been pushed back. If Magenta Scissor hadn’t held him up, he would’ve fallen and been evaporated in an instant. But he managed to hold his ground now.

This was thanks to the presence of Trilead next to him. It wasn’t simply that the burden had been halved; the other avatar was normally so silent and polite,

and his unexpectedly hot and intense Incarnate was giving Haruyuki strength.

Many mysteries lingered around the Burst Linker Trilead Tetroxide. Why had he left the Castle, joined Nega Nebulus, and even taken part in that day's Territories? Haruyuki kept thinking about the reason for this in one corner of his mind. Naturally, it wasn't that he doubted Trilead. But he also wasn't seeking the reason solely out of friendship; he suspected Lead felt powerfully motivated to do all this for some reason.

Right now, through their fused Incarnates, Haruyuki felt like he could understand that motivation, albeit only slightly. A thirst for the larger world. Something similar to the hope that Haruyuki had held in his heart all this time also existed inside of Lead. Farther ahead...He wanted to accelerate to somewhere that was not here.

"Lead, you wanted to fly, too, huh?" Haruyuki murmured in his thoughts, and he heard the answer right away.

"Yes, Crow. I've always...wanted to fly. I wanted to go over the walls of the Castle and experience the great wide world."

In which case, the fact that Oscillatory Universe was trying to shut down the Accelerated World also made them Lead's enemy. That alone gave him plenty of reason to fight.

"Unh...Aaaaaah!!" Haruyuki shouted.

"Haaaaaaah!!" Lead howled.

The Incarnate shield grew brighter, and the laser was incrementally pushed back. But at the same time, the vast amount of energy released in the circle of light was heating the marble floor to magma levels, and they were starting to take damage. He could have endured the pain of his feet burning, no matter how bad it got, but the decline in his health gauge showed no signs of stopping.

"Bell, we need you!!" Haruyuki shouted to Chiyuri on standby to the rear when his gauge was down 30 percent. Immediately, the sound of chimes echoed in the air.

"Citron...Caaaaaallllll!!!"

A green light gushed out to envelop Haruyuki and Lead. His health gauge gradually recovered, flickering irregularly. They had to finish this fight before Chiyuri's special-attack gauge ran out.

He settled his breathing and shouted an instruction at Lead. "We narrow it down on the angle of reflection! The image of bouncing the energy back on a single point with a mirror!!"

"Yes!!" the young samurai replied boldly, producing an even more intense blue overlay.

Haruyuki pushed his imagination to the limit.

The shield of light, which had scattered the laser across a wide range with a loose convex shape, now gradually grew more and more level. The pressure on his body increased, and sparks flew from the joints of his avatar.

"Unh...Aah!"

"Hngaaah!"

The instant their Incarnates synced and the shield turned into a mirror, a large portion of the laser was reflected diagonally upward into the border between the wall and the ceiling. It appeared that even this great hall had not been given the strength to withstand Trisagion. Although it was not pierced in an instant like at Midtown, the stained glass and silver pillars were instantly red-hot.

"It's still not enough, Crow! Unless you precisely fire at the source of the laser, the attack will not stop!" A sharp voice came to him from the top of his own head.

"*I...know!*" he replied in his thoughts.

Any and all attacks simply passed through Metatron's first form, except for the launch portal on its head while the laser was firing. But the only thing that could fight Trisagion, a force that burned up everything in its path, was a laser of similar power. In other words, the only thing they could do was reflect Trisagion back at its launch portal.

When he had succeeded in doing that at Tokyo Midtown, Kuroyukihime, Niko, Fuko, Takumu—ten of his comrades had supported him from behind. There was

no one directly holding him up at that moment. But Chiyuri was behind him, desperately rewinding any damage, Trilead was beside him with the same desire in his heart, and Metatron was on his head, rooting for him and guiding him despite being an Enemy herself.

No. It wasn't just the three of them. Haruyuki could feel the hands of many, many more people touching him and giving him power. The very existence of all the Burst Linkers he'd met and formed bonds with in the Accelerated World was turning into pure Incarnate energy and filling his body.

"G...oooooooo!!" Fighting back against the intense pressure, Haruyuki moved the mirror of light.

The reflected laser moved backward, drawing a red line along the wall, and perfectly overlapped with the source. He felt something being hit. The beam gradually diminished, became intermittent, and disappeared.

The space above the altar shattered like glass, and the fearsomely massive silhouette took on material form. Wings like layers of silver tapestry. A body composed of dozens of metal rings. And a head that looked like a planet. The first form of the Legend-class Enemy, one of the Four Saints, the Archangel Metatron, had at last revealed itself.

The massive laser portal in the center of its head was burned black with cracks radiating outward. But this didn't mean that the first form had been completely destroyed. Metatron's icon floated up above Haruyuki's head and encouraged them.



“Now, just a little farther. If I calculate all the attack patterns and timing, you can most certainly defeat this opponent now.”

“Yeah. We’re counting on you, Metatron!” Haruyuki shouted, and he, Chiyuri, and Lead nodded at one another.

He drew Lucid Blade from his right hip and jumped off the ground, accelerating instantly. Lead also pushed forward, readying The Infinity. Ahead, the massive bulk of the Enemy started moving again, spreading its knife-sharp wings high and wide.

A battle cry roaring up from the depths of his stomach, Haruyuki ran.

“Lotus, we got about five minutes until Pard and them regenerate...I think,” Niko said, looking at her Instruct menu.

The reason she couldn’t specify the regeneration timing just from looking at the total dive time was that they didn’t know how much time had passed from the moment the Territories stage changed to the Unlimited Neutral Field until the instant when Fuko and the others were wiped out. But Niko had good instincts, and if she read it as five minutes, then it likely wouldn’t be off by that much.

Kuroyukihime nodded.

In the end, not one of the death markers inside the ice cage had disappeared. This meant, basically, that for some reason—likely obstruction from the Oscillatory side—after escaping from the cage, Silver Crow hadn’t been able to reach a portal. In other words, there was a strong possibility that he, too, was dead somewhere nearby. She hadn’t the slightest intention of reproaching him for that, however; he had no doubt expended every effort in his own way.

Looking up at the bloody sunrise, Kuroyukihime called to her beloved child in her heart. *It’s all right, Haruyuki. We will rescue Fuko and the others. And get vengeance for you, as well. Just wait a little longer.*

She pricked her ears up to the sound of the dry wind for a moment before returning her gaze to Sengakuji below.

The massive ice cage in the center of the plaza. And immediately next to it, the Seven Dwarves’ Glacier Behemoth and Snow Fairy. In the area of the cage, twelve Oscillatory Universe members stood evenly spaced on strict guard. She had to admit that she would have expected nothing less than the watch they

kept not only over the area on the ground, but also the air above. If they hadn't been hiding on top of an unclimbable building, Kuroyukihime and Niko wouldn't have been able to stay under their radar for the last forty minutes or so.

"The moment when everyone regenerates, and Behemoth and Fairy activate their Incarnate techniques, is our sole chance at victory," Kuroyukihime murmured.

"Yeah." Niko nodded. The only shot we got is to kill 'em in one blow, you an' me. Not impossible if we can pinpoint their crit spots from here. But it takes a bit to deploy my Invincible. Won't make it in time if I summon it once regeneration starts, and if I call it in advance, it'll give us away."

"What about Peacemaker's charge shots?" Kuroyukihime looked at the handgun on the younger girl's hip, and Niko looked thoughtful for a moment before quickly shaking her head.

"The guards on the outskirts might be one thing, but there's no way I can blow Behemoth and Fairy away instantly, even fully charged. I wish I could say I could boost the power with Incarnate, but the fact is that I can only use first-level range and movement expansion with my main body. Honestly. If it was gonna come to this, a second-level—"

Destructive Incarnate is something I shoulda mastered, Niko was no doubt about to say, and Kuroyukihime unconsciously patted her with the flat of her sword blade.

"Hey, don't treat me like a baby."

"Mm? Oh, this was how I'd treat a small child."

"How is that different—?" the Red King started to shout but hurriedly clamped her mouth shut.

Pushing back the urge to say *See? You are indeed a child*, Kuroyukihime returned to the matter at hand. "At any rate, if you summoned your Enhanced Armament, could you take out one of them—Snow Fairy, if possible?"

"O'course. But like I said..."

"It doesn't have to be all of it. Could you call just the cockpit and main

armament in a few seconds, for instance?”

“Wouldn’t be able to move with just that. Although without the thrusters, it’s basically the same. Right. Two parts alone, I’d need five—no, four seconds.”

“Hmm.” Looking down again on Sengakuji, which was now an execution site, Kuroyukihime muttered half to herself. “Understood. I will buy you those four seconds.”

“You mean you’re gonna take on Behemoth and Fairy—wait, add in the guards, and that’s fourteen people at once?” Niko was indeed surprised.

“Yes,” Kuroyukihime answered crisply. “Neither Behemoth nor Fairy will be particularly skilled at close-range battle in cramped quarters. It’s not impossible if I can get in a preemptive strike.”

“I got this feeling that the preemptive part’s gonna be hard,” Niko started but then closed her mouth and nodded, almost hanging her head. “Right. Do it. In exchange, I’ll make sure I succeed in summoning my Enhanced Armament and snipe that Fairy.”

“Good. Strategy’s settled then. We’ve got about three minutes left.”

“Two minutes, forty seconds,” Niko corrected, giving her a wry grin.

Kuroyukihime crossed the swords of both arms while still flat on her belly on the roof. To target the instant that Glacier Behemoth and Snow Fairy activated their Incarnate techniques, she would have to fly off the roof a few seconds before that. As long as she could approach to within a sword’s reach without anyone noticing, she was confident she could keep their attention with a full-powered attack for four seconds.

She was wagering the success of her surprise attack on whether any of the twelve people monitoring the area happened to check the sky the instant she flew off the building. If they’d had someone else with them, she would have considered a diversionary tactic, but there was no one, so there was nothing to be done about that. All she could do was leave luck to the heavens and charge in.

Even having made it through countless scenes of carnage in the Accelerated World, the following two minutes were longer than anything Kuroyukihime

could remember. Most likely, it was the same for Niko. The voice that counted down the time remaining in increments of fifteen seconds was filled with a nervousness the other girl couldn't completely suppress.

When she heard Niko announce one minute left, Kuroyukihime gave voice to something she'd been thinking about for a while. "Listen, Rain—Niko. If this surprise attack fails, and I'm defeated, you use that Incarnate technique of yours and escape through the nearest portal."

"Yeah, I got it. I'll go back to the taxi and pull off your Neurolinker—"

"No, not that. Stop the taxi and leave me accelerated. But don't come into the Unlimited Neutral Field anymore."

"Hey, what are you saying?" Niko brought her face up to start to argue.

"If I lose all my points, take care of the new Legion," Kuroyukihime stated calmly.

Niko started to flare up, and Kuroyukihime gently brought her own head to touch hers. She could sense the younger girl desperately swallowing her words, and she apologized for her selfishness in her heart.

Finally, she announced in a voice that trembled only a little, "Thirty seconds left."

"Roger."

Pulling her head away, Kuroyukihime focused on the battlefield below her eyes. There would be a very gamelike light effect from the death markers accompanying the regeneration. In that instant alone, the attention of the twelve monitoring the outside would be directed downward, albeit for less than a second.

"Fifteen seconds."

She moved away from Niko to a spot just barely still on the roof. She dug the tip of her right foot into the steel of the floor and focused her strength into her entire body.

When she leapt out toward Sengakuji, she would first aim for Behemoth in midair with her range-expanding Incarnate technique Vorpals Strike. It would be

difficult to pinpoint his critical points while in free fall, but she should be able to keep him from moving for a while at least. She would land using the reaction force from the technique, draw near in a heartbeat, and bring the melee to zero distance.

“Ten seconds.”

Kuroyukihime tensed her mind so she wouldn't miss the change in the death markers.

But then one of the Oscillatory members pointed upward and shouted, “Hey, over there!”

Kuroyukihime held her breath, but the finger was not pointed toward the building where she and Niko were hiding. It was pointing at something—someone farther up in the sky. She and Niko both looked silently at the northern sky.

A star. No—a person? Against the clouds dyed red, a human shadow infused with a pure light hung motionless. The long-sleeved dress was white. The hair that danced in the breeze was silver. A pair of snowy-white wings extended far out from her back. It wasn't a duel avatar. It wasn't a flesh-and-blood human. It was an Enemy.

“Meta...tron?” Kuroyukihime murmured.

Eyelids only slightly opened, the shadow looked down on the earth with golden eyes and slowly raised her right hand.

There was no mistake. This was the true form of the Saint, the Archangel Metatron, the Legend-class Enemy Kuroyukihime had seen just once at Tokyo Midtown.

But Haruyuki Arita said that her true form had been deeply wounded in the battle with the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, and that she was currently dormant in the boss room of the Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth. She had only appeared as a tiny 3-D icon recently. So why was her true form here now?

Naturally, the Archangel wasn't going to respond to Kuroyukihime's question. Instead, the angel made the halo above her head flash brilliantly while she said in a murmur that threatened to pierce the soul at the same time, “Trisagion.”

A light was born. The massive shining pillar pierced the thick clouds and poured down from the sky. The entire field was colored a snowy white.

She heard Snow Fairy shouting in Sengakuji directly below, “Great Growler!”

Immediately after, the pillar of light reached the plaza. At first, there was only a pure-white silence. But soon, the earth shook with a heavy rumbling, and the building on which Kuroyukihime and Niko were encamped swayed and shuddered. The ice cage in the center of the plaza evaporated, and the steel floor grew incandescent before their eyes. The pillars and small shrines lined up along the pilgrim’s road melted one after another or else burned up. Kuroyukihime heard several screams. The members of Oscillatory who were late to flee were swallowed up in the ultrahot light and killed instantly.

Twenty days earlier, Kuroyukihime had taken on the mission to attack Tokyo Midtown with her Nega Nebulus comrades in order to destroy the main ISS kit body, so she knew in her bones the intense ferocity of the laser emitted by Metatron’s first form. The Trisagion of the true form also likely had the same attack attributes, but the power and scope were on an entirely different level. A superpowerful attack worthy of the title of the Archangel’s divine retribution.

The laser was done firing after about five seconds, but it felt several times longer than that to Kuroyukihime. Even once the pillar of light disappeared, the central part of the plaza was still incandescent, and the remains of objects were in flames. The four new death markers were likely those of the Oscillatory members who had died instantly. Where the ice cage had melted, the fifteen markers remained as they were, naturally. And then nearby, there was something curious.

A transparent blue cube. Inside the massive cube, more than three meters to a side, two shadows of differing sizes were locked away. Kuroyukihime finally realized that they were Snow Fairy and Glacier Behemoth, who had curled his bulk up to be as small as possible. She was simply stunned that they had managed to survive a direct hit from that laser, but the pair showed no sign of coming out of the cube. Most likely, although they had managed to avoid instant death by freezing themselves with Incarnate, they also weren’t able to escape it under their own power. Or perhaps this was the type of technique that could manage stellar defensive powers by incorporating this kind of

constraint right from the start.

Although the vertices and sharp edges of the ice cube had been exposed to the high-temperature laser and were melting away, it didn't look like it would break for the time being without some additional damage being applied from the outside. In which case, the only remaining enemies were the eight who had fled from the plaza.

Niko produced a barely audible voice. "That was sum'in...Who's that girl there?"

Now that she mentioned it, Kuroyukihime realized that Niko and the Prominence group still didn't know Metatron, and she struggled with how to explain it exactly. But before she had the chance, there was movement in the plaza. The fifteen death markers spinning quietly in the center began to emit light of a variety of colors.

"She's a member of Nega Nebulus, too. I'll explain later. Right now, Raker and the others are regenerating."

"Yeah. Dang it. What was that plan we worked so hard to put together for?"

"Don't say that. The fact is, it's a huge help, yes?" Kuroyukihime patted Niko's back and got to her feet.

When she looked up, the Archangel Metatron was slowly flapping her wings in the sky. Her eyes were still closed, but there seemed to be a pained look on her beautiful face. Had she maybe used too much power again with the Trisagion? And where was Silver Crow? Metatron was supposedly haunting him.

The new question rose up in her mind, and Kuroyukihime looked around, but there was no sign of Crow.

"Hey! Quit yer gawkin'. We gotta join up with the others."

At the sound of Niko's voice, she brought her gaze forward again, just as the death markers were starting to change into individual duel avatars.

Even excluding the frozen Fairy and Behemoth, there were still eight enemies lurking in the environs of Sengakuji. They likely weren't on par with the Seven Dwarves, but she was certain that they would all be experienced veterans. They

had to first work with Sky Raker and their other newly regenerated friends to wipe out the enemy and ensure their safety.

“All right. Let’s go.” Kuroyukihime nodded.

Niko turned her back to her. “C’mon. Piggyback.”

“...?”

“You’re not gonna walk away if you jump from this height. I’ll take you down with my Incarnate technique.”

She was somewhat embarrassed to appear in front of her Legion members while being carried on someone’s back like a child. But she also hesitated to use flashy Incarnate techniques or special attacks just to offset the speed of her fall with reactive forces.

“Hurry and get us down.” Kuroyukihime was about to climb on the smaller avatar’s back, overcoming her embarrassment. But once again, she was unable to follow through.

Suddenly, she smelled something on the wind. The scent of dry paper and black tea. A large hardcover book and...royal milk tea steeped with CTC Assam.

“Megumi?” Kuroyukihime murmured hoarsely, sending her gaze racing over the area.

A tall, narrow building standing alone on the north side of Sengakuji. At the top, tapered in like a tower, a single shadow appeared. The distinctive silhouette with a visor and swollen armor skirt was a perfect match for the duel avatar of Megumi Wakamiya that sat in her memory. The pale-peach light that enveloped her slender body was likely an Incarnate overlay.

The avatar brandished the staff gripped in her right hand high above her head and spoke in a voice that sounded pained somehow.

“Paradigm Revolution.”

Rainbow light shot out of the staff, passed close by the Archangel Metatron hovering directly above, and pierced the cloud colored in the dawn’s light.

Once again, the world shook. The shimmering rainbow aurora rapidly spread out, blew past Kuroyukihime and Niko as they braced themselves, and scattered

off behind them. The color of the clouds changed from a bloody red to a noxious purple.

Then the terrain was transformed. The buildings of the Demon City stage, perpendicular like swords, grew long, sharp thorns that twisted in weird ways. At Kuroyukihime's and Niko's feet, the steel plates rippled like living creatures, became gnarled, and grew countless nail-like spikes.

"Rain, hang on!" Kuroyukihime reached out and pulled Niko's avatar in close. In a complete turnaround from the situation a moment earlier, the Red King was pressed up against Kuroyukihime's chest.

"Wh-what the hell?!" Niko shouted. "What's going on?!"

"A forced Change. It's the Hell stage!!" Kuroyukihime shouted, turning her gaze to their comrades on the ground.

There were a number of fiendish gimmicks in the Hell stage, the greatest of the dark types, and one of them was that the ground was a damage zone. All earth outside of buildings and dungeons changed into steel thorns, poisonous bogs, acid swamps, lava, and more, so that players took damage by simply standing still.

If you drew a Hell stage in a Normal Duel Field, it just meant that the battle would be decided that much faster, and the Gallery was, in fact, delighted at the appearance of the super-rare stage. On the other hand, however, if the Unlimited Neutral Field changed to a Hell stage, it was truly hell. If there were no buildings nearby to flee into and no way to deal with the damage zones, you were forced to seek out a safe zone while dying any number of times.

Fortunately, Black Lotus's normal hovering movement ability rendered the majority of the damage zones harmless, but that wasn't the case for her comrades. She was about to lean over the building and instruct the newly regenerated Legion members to flee inside a building, but before she could, Niko shouted.

"Ah! The angel girl!"

"...?!"

She quickly looked up and saw that the Archangel Metatron had lost the light

enveloping her body and was plummeting to the ground, countless feathers scattering, like a swan shot with an arrow.

In the Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth, which was her palace, there was a gimmick that forcibly weakened Metatron when the interior changed to a Hell stage. Most likely, that same mechanism worked on her true form as well, and the very fact that she was in this space robbed her of her power, after she had just used Trisagion and exhausted herself. There was no way this was a coincidence.

The White Legion—and the White King, White Cosmos, had anticipated the interference of the Archangel Metatron. In which case, Cosmos wouldn't be satisfied with merely sealing Metatron's power away. Kuroyukihime had no doubt that she would pull yet another trick to try to defeat Metatron's main form.

She couldn't decide whether to go save her comrades trapped in damage zones or the falling Metatron. As she wrestled with this, she called in the back of her mind.

Silver Crow...Haruyuki, where are you?!

Shihoko Nago/Chocolat Puppeteer was the first of the fourteen-member attack team to die. Thus, she also regenerated before everyone else, albeit only by a matter of seconds. But those seconds gave her the time to process a series of unexpected incidents.

The pillar of light that poured down just before she regenerated instantly melted the ice wall imprisoning them and forced the powerful foes Glacier Behemoth and Snow Fairy to freeze themselves. It seemed like the danger of Unlimited PK had receded, but right before she regenerated, the veil of the aurora spread out once more and changed the field from the Demon Stage that was all cold and flat metal to a disgusting, desolate stage that Shihoko had never seen before. Countless sharp spikes shot up through the ground, and the instant she felt the sharp pain on the soles of her feet, she realized that this was a powerful damage zone and that her regenerated friends would be hurt once more.

If it had been a normal Change, the wait time for all the death markers would have been ignored, and they would have all regenerated instantly, but there was no change in the majority of the markers. So this was indeed an extremely irregular phenomenon deliberately brought about by someone.

Satomi and Yume had died at nearly the same time, and they were already back, faces twisting with pain on top of the spikes. Even if they did try to make a break for the buildings beyond the plaza, the members of Oscillatory who had survived the initial massive-scale laser attack would likely be lying in wait there, and escaping in a small group was basically like telling them to pick them off one by one.

I came back to life first. I have to do something fast, Shihoko thought, sending her gaze up to her own health gauge. Because she was taking about 1 percent damage every second due to the spikes, her special-attack gauge was also inching upward, but it had returned to zero when she regenerated; it would take too long to charge like this. Making up her mind, she threw her body on the thorny ground.

“Aah!” A cry slipped out of her at the intense burning pain across her body, but she gritted her teeth and stayed in position.

“Choco!”

“What are you—?!”

Satomi and Yume were about to race over to her, but she held up a hand to check them and got to her feet. In just a few seconds, her health gauge had dropped by nearly half, but her special-attack gauge was charged up to where she needed it to be.

“Cocoa Fountain!!”

As she shouted the technique name, she turned her hands downward, and brown chocolate welled up from the roots of the spikes, covering the ground in the blink of an eye. It had no sooner enveloped her comrades’ death markers than she was turning to Mint Mitten. “Min-Min, cool it off!”

Her longtime friend appeared to grasp Shihoko’s intent immediately. She touched the large gloves equipped on her hands to the chocolate pond and

shouted, “Vapor Compression!!”

Mint Mitten’s main fighting method was to slow her opponent’s movement with chilling techniques such as Menthol Blow and Icilin Strike and then finish them off with hand-to-hand combat. But those techniques were hallucinations of cold at best; they didn’t actually generate any chill damage, so if her opponent realized this, they would push past the chill through sheer willpower and charge her. To turn the tables in situations like that, she had a third special attack, Vapor Compression. This technique made use of the compressors built into her hands to carry out vaporization and instantly produce real freezing air. If a player was hit directly, they would take targeted damage as the moving parts of their body froze. It didn’t have the same brutal power of Glacier Behemoth’s Sigh of Cocytus, but at the moment, it was more than enough.

Steam jetted from Mint’s shoulders, and a pale cloud of chilled air puffed out from her hands to cover the chocolate. The chocolate hardened in an instant, the spikes buried beneath it, to nullify the damage zone.

Immediately after, Olive Grab and Bush Utan regenerated. They had no sooner regained their material bodies than they were brandishing fists.

“How dare you do this...”

“...to us, you jerrrrks!”

They were ready to fly out at the massive cube of ice standing to the rear of Shihoko and her friends.

“Ah...W-wait, U!” Shihoko hurriedly moved to stop them.

The ice cube, more than three meters on each side, encased Glacier Behemoth, shrinking his dragon bulk down as much as possible, and Snow Fairy, pressed to his chest. Fairy herself had created the ice. The instant before the incredibly destructive laser rained down on the area, she had locked them up in the cube to avoid instant death.

So she wasn’t surprised that Utan and Olive wanted to surround them and attack while the pair were still in there. But most likely, it wasn’t that they weren’t moving, but that they *couldn’t* move. The ice was so hard and strong that it couldn’t be broken from inside, which is exactly why it could withstand a

direct hit from that laser. In other words, attacking and breaking the ice from the outside might have the effect of saving Fairy and Behemoth.

But Shihoko was at a loss for how to explain this guess to Utan and Olive when they burned with such rage. But before she could open her mouth again, Satomi and Yume took practical action and pinned their arms behind their backs.

“You can’t leave the chocolate!”

“You’ll take damage if you step on the thorns!”

Properly warned, Utan and Olive finally noticed the malicious spikes buried in the ground beyond the chocolate zone. They blinked their eye lenses rapidly a few times and then looked up at the dark-purple sky, shuddering.

“Th-this can’t be...”

“The Hell stage our boys have heard about?”

Hearing this, the girls’ faces also grew grim.

“What? A Hell stage?”

“I’ve never seen one before...”

Of course, it was also the first time Shihoko had seen with her own eyes the Hell stage, the greatest of the dark types—the most malicious and evil of all stage attributes. She tried to remember what its gimmicks were, but the core of her mind was numb, and her thoughts wouldn’t connect at all. A coincidence? Probably not. So then the White Legion changed the Demon City to Hell? How? And for what purpose?

She stood stock-still, gaping up at the bizarre color of the sky.

Suddenly, she heard a strange resonance like bundled steel plates being ripped apart. Followed by a husky yell.

“Watch out!”

Someone shoved her down from behind, and a millisecond later, a beam of dull-black light shot through the space above her head before plunging into the ground on the north side of the plaza. A lump of darkness swelled up, and

strange flames exploded upward.

The one who had saved Shihoko was Magenta Scissor—Rui Odagiri. Now that she thought about it, Magenta had also tried to save her when Snow Fairy used Brinicle. The fact that she'd been able to detect a danger and move before anyone else, even though she, too, had only just regenerated, was proof that she'd also been thinking coolly while she was dead.

She was a scary enemy when I met her...But she actually is pretty amazing.

Shihoko moved to thank Rui. "Um, Magenta, thanks..."

"Talk later. We're in a bad sitch here," she muttered.

The urgency in her tone made Shihoko ask the obvious: Who on earth had fired that black beam of light just now? Had one of the Oscillatory members who fled Sengakuji to avoid the initial massive laser returned?

And then she noticed an impossibly enormous human-shaped silhouette entering the plaza through the gate on the south side. It far surpassed Glacier Behemoth in height, reaching ten meters at least. It leaned forward with long arms, spiraling horns growing out of its head. Its face sank into the shadows; the eyes alone were red like glowing embers. She found it hard to believe that this was a duel avatar, and she stared hard before she saw the four green horizontal lines tacked up above the giant's head. A health gauge. But in the Unlimited Neutral Field, duel avatar health gauges were invisible. Which meant it was an Enemy. And one that had a four-level health gauge...

"A Legend class?" Shihoko murmured.

"No," Aqua Current replied, having regenerated at some point. "That is...Devil class. The highest level of Enemy, appearing only in the Hell stage." Even Current's normally calm voice contained an edge of tension.

"One thing after another...isn't it?" Cyan Pile sounded similarly strained as he came to stand next to her.

And then from the other side of him, Ash Roller groaned, "Out of the frying pan into the fire, man."

Crimson flames in its eyes, the massive demon looked down on Shihoko and

her friends as it approached one steady step after the other. A type of pressure she'd never felt before made her want to flee immediately, but not everyone was done regenerating. Only nine had come back to life so far; the remaining five would regenerate within a minute or so, but in this situation, that was a very, very long time.

As the Enemy approached, it cried out in a bizarre voice, “” An inky electrical current ran along its two twisted horns.

“It’s coming again! Evasive action!” Magenta cried out sharply, still supporting Shihoko from behind.

Everyone immediately dropped into a defensive position. But the chocolate safe zone that Shihoko and Satomi had created wasn’t even ten meters across, making it difficult to leap off in any one direction.

The sparks coalesced into a small point in front of the devil’s forehead before transforming into the dark laser and jetting forward once more. The light roared bizarrely, like the cry of a living creature, as it closed in, and the nine Burst Linkers moved desperately to avoid it.

Fortunately, none of them took a direct hit, but the beam of light scraped the cube of ice a little ways off and slid away to the north, causing another massive explosion.

“Dammit. The ice!” Cyan Pile shouted.

Shihoko hurriedly looked over at the blue cube and saw a crack spreading out from where the beam had grazed it. The entire cube threatened to smash to pieces if it was hit again.

What would Behemoth and Fairy do if they were released now? Would they ignore the devil and activate their Incarnate techniques to annihilate Nega Nebulus once more? Or would they flee to a safe place like their comrades? Or...would they call a temporary cease-fire and fight alongside Shihoko and hers?

Were there really three possibilities? Was a future maybe possible where they could understand the members of Oscillatory and be understood in return, like with Rui, who earnestly tried to protect Shihoko now? She took her eyes off the

approaching Enemy and looked up at the two Burst Linkers locked in the cube behind her.

“No. They won’t help us,” Aqua Current spat harshly, having come to stand next to Shihoko at some point, almost as if to put an end to the younger girl’s optimistic questioning. She returned her gaze to the Enemy to the south. “Because it was Oscillatory who made the change to the Hell stage, and it’s them controlling the Devil class.”

“C-controlling?” Shihoko repeated, dumbfounded.

Current pointed at the Enemy’s head with her flowing-water hand. “You can see a silver crown on the forehead.”

“Oh...You really can...” When she narrowed her eyes, Shihoko could see it, too: a metal crown embedded right below the twisting spiral horns. The monster didn’t have any other type of adornment, so the silver circlet was out of sync with the rest of the design.

“That’s an item Oscillatory uses to tame Enemies. Meaning Fairy and the rest of them won’t attack that thing.”

Shihoko clenched her dark-brown fists. Her hopeful thought of maybe being able to fight together was sweeter than even white chocolate. Oscillatory Universe was trying to eradicate Nega Nebulus from the Accelerated World and wasn’t fussy about how they did it. They were the ultimate enemy, and the only thing left for Nega Nebulus to do was fight and destroy them. “I understand.”

As Shihoko spoke, Moose and Porcupine, formerly of Prominence’s Triplex, and Nega Nebulus Element Ardor Maiden regenerated. They had already grasped the desperate nature of the situation apparently, and Moose stepped forward, swinging his horns.

“This area is disadvantageous for fighting a Devil class. We move north in thirty seconds!”

“But, Moose, the area around us is all damage zone!” Maiden noted.

“Pokki will take care of the thorns!” he replied without hesitation.

“Whoa, don’t go dumping this in my lap!” Thistle Porcupine snapped but then

looked back and instructed, “I’ll make a path, so everyone get ready to dash!”

The party responded as one.

Two seconds later, the remaining two death markers were enveloped in light one after the other, and the leader and Submaster of the attacking team—Scarlet Rain and Blood Leopard—were regenerated.

A second after that, the Devil-class Enemy dropped into position to fire the dark laser for the third time.

“Evasion rea—,” Moose started to say.

“We can’t!” Shihoko turned to him and screamed, forgetting herself. “The cube is in the line of sight!!”

If the ice cube was hit with the beam of light one more time, it would be destroyed—and Behemoth and Fairy freed. If Nega Nebulus got caught in a pincer attack between a Devil-class Enemy and two of the Seven Dwarves, there was a strong possibility that they would be annihilated once more.

“Nngh!” Moose groaned.

“Anyone with Incarnate defense to the front!” Sky Raker’s clear voice rang out. “We will take this, no matter what!”

Instantly, Aqua Current and Cassis Moose lined up on either side of Raker. They were enveloped in Current’s blue, Moose’s purple, and Raker’s green overlays.

In contrast, the Devil-class Enemy appeared to be grinning from a height of ten meters. “ ” The dark sparks concentrated instantly into a point.

“Maelstrom!!” shouted Aqua Current.

“Dozer Blade!!” Cassis Moose.

“Wind Veil!!” Sky Raker.

A vortex of water spinning at high speeds became a circular shield, a steel plate with rough spikes growing out from top and bottom ate into the ground, and a green wind became a dome to wrap around them all. A triple Incarnate defensive wall from three of the most powerful class of high rankers. It seemed

impossible that there existed an attack in the Accelerated World that this could not defend against.

However...However.

Shihoko—and probably the other thirteen—had forgotten about the fifteenth death marker spinning quietly a little ways off from the brown safety zone. Without anyone noticing, the ivory duel avatar regenerated at some point and raised his right hand in a relaxed motion. The dry, emotionless voice they had heard an hour earlier echoed once more.

“Imaginary Time.”

Shihoko felt an empty film without sound or light or vibration spread out like foam. Dammit. *Dammit*. Now it wouldn’t just be the triple wall that would be eliminated but also the ice cube imprisoning Fairy and Behemoth.

“Him!”

“This is bad!”

Perhaps thinking the same thing, Magenta Scissor took the large knives off her hips, and Cyan Pile raised the pile driver of his right arm. But they were already too late.

“Vorpall Strike!!”

Shihoko felt like she heard a new voice. Maybe it was just a thought that echoed in her soul. Because even if someone had called out that technique name, she’d never make it in time, and beyond that, the voice belonged to someone who wasn’t even there.

However.

From behind Shihoko and her friends, a crimson light raced across the sky, howling with a metallic vibration, and pierced the right side of the ivory duel avatar, digging deep into the robe-type armor. The colorless foam about to swallow the Incarnate wall was repelled and disappeared without a sound. And then the devil launched its dark beam of light.

Aqua Current’s water wall was the first to be hit, and it was pierced after two seconds of resistance. Cassis Moose’s steel wall lasted three seconds before the

laser cut through it. Finally, Sky Raker's wind wall held the black light for four, five seconds, spectacular sparks flying everywhere. Eventually, the beam of light gradually grew narrower, flickered and decayed, and then disappeared.

"Giga-coooooooooool!! That's my Master Raker!!" Ash Roller shouted, and Bush Utan patted him on the back.

"Sure, but, Bro, what was that attack?!"

Shihoko turned around with them and saw a shadow leaning forward and racing toward them at top speed as though the damage zone didn't exist. Even in the weak lighting of the Hell stage, the armor was still semitransparent, shining deeply like black crystal. Sharp swords extended from all four limbs. Violet-blue eye lenses glittered sharply behind goggles. The Black King, World End, Black Lotus.

"Lo...Why...?!" Ardor Maiden gave voice to all their confusion, and the Black King nodded wordlessly in return.

It was a fact that Kuroyukihime had alighted on the bus they were all riding at Nishi Shinjuku. Even if she had gotten back on the next bus that came, she probably wouldn't have reached Minato No. 3 before the start of the Territories. And to begin with, why had she come chasing after them anyway? It should have been impossible at that point to see through to the massive trap the White Legion had set.

Shihoko gaped while the Black King came around to the safe zone and stopped to face the ivory duel avatar.

"I never imagined you'd come yourself, Ivory Tower."

Not responding immediately to the Black King, the tall, slender tower of an avatar glanced at his hip where a hole gaped. He had to have been feeling intense pain at having taken a blow like that in the Unlimited Neutral Field—not to mention the sharp thorns he was standing on—but he was impossibly unruffled.

The name Ivory Tower had been in the mission notes. Although he was the fourth of the Seven Dwarves, he was the White King's full proxy, a mysterious Burst Linker.

“I would say the same to you, Black Lotus,” Ivory spoke in an even, nearly inflectionless tone as he shifted his gaze back to her, almost as though he felt no pain. “Exactly what did you come here to do?”

“It’s obvious. I came to crush the plans of Oscillatory and the Acceleration Research Society.”

“I see. That was a foolish question. I suppose I should have asked *why* you came. We had no intention of involving you in the true hell that is about to begin,” he spat, and while Shihoko struggled to understand what he meant, he revealed the arm hidden by his robe-type armor.

“That...can’t be?!” Sky Raker shouted as soon as she saw the white staff clutched in his hand.

It didn’t look like the sort of Enhanced Armament that would surprise a Burst Linker as experienced as Sky Raker. About eighty centimeters long, it was extremely simple overall, with just a silver sphere at the top.

The instant Ivory Tower moved to brandish the staff, Black Lotus moved again. “Vorpall Strike!!”

The sword of her right hand moved like a flash of light, launching a crimson lance at a speed that seemed impossible for an Incarnate technique. But just as it was on the verge of gouging into Ivory Tower’s shoulder, the special attack was blocked by a massive hand coming down from the sky above.

The Devil-class Enemy, which had gotten quite close without them noticing, had reached out its left hand to protect Ivory. The crimson lance plunged deep into the thick palm but didn’t manage to pierce it, and the devil didn’t look to have taken any real damage. The massive hand grabbed onto Ivory Tower and lifted him up onto its shoulder. It was then that Shihoko realized that the sphere embedded in Ivory Tower’s staff and the crown biting into the devil’s forehead shone with exactly the same silver light.

“There’s no mistake,” Fuko said. “That’s The Luminary.”

“For real?!” Thistle Porcupine threw her head back. “It looks like a toy, though!”

“The Seven Arcs are shaped by their owners. In other words, this means that

system-wise, Ivory Tower is the owner.”

It had already been clear that the delta Arc, The Luminary, was in the hands of the Acceleration Research Society—the White Legion. In which case, the owner naturally should have been the White King, White Cosmos. So had she transferred this peerless Enhanced Armament to her underling for the sake of the battle that day?

They’re serious. How serious are they, even? They’re using any and all methods to try to crush Nega Nebulus.

A chill ran up her spine.

The devil was so tall, she had to crane her neck to look up at its shoulder where Ivory Tower brandished his staff once more. The silver orb shone brilliantly, and the devil’s crown flashed in response.

Shihoko felt another new shaking of the earth beneath her feet. It wasn’t just the main gate to the south of the plaza. Massive shadows were approaching from the east, west, and north entrances. Human-shaped. Dragon-shaped. Others shaped like cows or wolves or squid. Maybe ten of them. All were unbelievably huge and terribly repulsive, and without exception, silver crowns glittered on their heads.

“This many...Devil-class...,” Cyan Pile groaned.

Even the normally voluble Ash Roller merely muttered, “Tera sucks...”

Shihoko, Satomi, and Yume were frozen in place, unable to make a sound.

“Fairy’s Brinicle was a manifestation of the bare minimum of respect and mercy, I’ll have you know.” Ivory Tower’s voice was as inorganic and yet somehow as pitying as ever. “That technique kills you in an instant quietly, like going to sleep. In exchange, Fairy and Behemoth would be forced to focus for dozens, hundreds of hours, and I would continue to die with you, but even so, we chose to do that. However, you rejected our mercy. This is the result of that.”

As if drawn in by the brightly shining staff, the herd of devils drew closer step by step. Dark clouds rolled in, and lightning flashed incessantly.

“You will die tortured by the thorns of Hell and the tyranny of the devils. You will continue to suffer until the last of you reaches total point loss. You are the ones who chose this.”

The ten Devil-class Enemies surrounded Shihoko and her friends, crying out strangely. “*ꦫꦶꦭꦶꦩ*” “*ꦫꦶꦭꦶꦩ*” Saliva dripped from long fangs, and countless tentacles twisted violently.

“‘You are the ones who chose this’? That line sounds very much like your ilk,” the Black King said in a strong, echoing voice, sword-arms still readied in front of and behind her. “Do you intend to tell me that the very people who were parasitized *chose* the Armor of Catastrophe and the ISS kits? You’re wrong about that. You lot have deftly manipulated so many Burst Linkers, pressed their backs to the wall, and created situations in which they had absolutely no choice but to do what you wanted. But don’t think that this trick is going to work forever. Today, Nega Nebulus is going to destroy all your plans!”

Ivory Tower narrowed his eye lenses into slender threads at this bold proclamation. “That in itself is a foolish choice.”

The herd of devils inched forward, as if unable to contain their anticipation for the moment of slaughter. The air, already tensed to the limit, shuddered, practically crackling with electricity.

Standing as though to protect Shihoko and her friends, Magenta Scissor abruptly murmured in a hoarse voice, “Choco—Chocolat. I’m going to do whatever it takes to get you three out of here at least.” Her armor shone a red light. There was only one reason that a duel avatar would emit light outside of a special attack: an Incarnate overlay.

After blinking for a second, Shihoko touched her hand gently to Magenta Scissor’s back. “Choco’s fine, Magenta Scissor. Thanks...But we’re not giving up yet.”

Magenta Scissor looked back, surprised, and Shihoko stared hard at the face hidden by ribbon armor.

“I’m sure there’s still something we can do. No matter how hopeless the situation, we can open up a path somewhere. I believe that.”

“You’re pretty strong, huh, Choco?” Magenta Scissor smiled faintly, and then, as if that were a sign, they—fifteen in number now with the Black King—dropped into a ready position at the same time.

“Well, then.” On the Enemy’s shoulder, Ivory Tower brandished The Luminary even higher. “Good-bye, Black Legion.” He brought the Arc down, and ten devils roared.

“Nngh!” At the same time as he landed, a sharp pain pierced his right foot, and Haruyuki let out a small grunt. As a metal color, Silver Crow had some resistance—albeit not much—to spike-type damage zones. But whenever he stepped down hard or landed from a jump on the countless thorns that rose up to cover the ground with the earlier Change, several of them pierced the soles of his feet, inflicting sharp pain and damage.

Meanwhile, the duel avatar facing him stood tall, coolly composed as though the thorns didn’t even exist. This was because two needles grew from the tips of her slender feet and one from the heels, so that the thorns of the ground didn’t reach her soles. And the needles weren’t only on her shoes. Keen barbs glittered on her knees, elbows, shoulders, and even on her surprisingly thin torso. Together with the rose-red armor, the countless spikes decorating the elegant design of the F-type avatar made her the very image of a rose.

“Sorry. I can’t let you through, Corvus,” she said in a gentle voice, tilting her sweet face mask slightly to one side. “Could you perhaps go off somewhere else?”

Her tone and the name she used for him reminded him strongly of Sky Raker, momentarily striking him speechless. He glanced up at the tapered tower rising up behind the rose avatar to rouse his battle spirit, before bringing his gaze back to her.

“I can’t do that. All the more so if someone of your class is protecting her.”

“Oh my! You’ve heard of me?”

He announced the name that had been in Kuroyukihime’s notes: “Third of the Seven Dwarves, Rose Milady.”

“Ding-ding.” The rose avatar nodded with a smile. “Although some people call me Grumpy.”

Contrary to this nickname, there was nothing particularly grumpy or threatening about her demeanor, but there was no mistaking that this was one opponent he couldn’t afford to let his guard down with. He’d already lost the power of flight in her initial attack.

After finding success in the mission against the last boss of the Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth, the first form of the Archangel Metatron, Haruyuki and his comrades had left the dungeon together with the finally freed second form—Metatron’s true form—and started back for Sengakuji. Haruyuki had held Trilead, while Metatron carried Lime Bell for him, so he’d been able to fly at basically full speed. They soared over the university campus and then south down the Dai-Ichi Keihin highway until finally their goal came into view. There, he had spotted a single Burst Linker on the roof of the tall, narrow building towering up on the northern side of Sengakuji.

He had no doubt that the pale-peach armor was that of the F-type who had hidden herself and changed the Territories stage into the Unlimited Neutral Field. Haruyuki instinctively knew that the reason she’d reappeared was to bring about some new supernatural phenomenon. And that this phenomenon would be something to push Nega Nebulus even farther up against the wall.

But his friends were going to regenerate in a few minutes. After a moment’s hesitation, Haruyuki decided to have Metatron go on ahead by herself to Sengakuji. He had taken Chiyuri from her, and the three had flown toward the roof of the building in question. But when they were less than a hundred meters out, a rain of something had been poured down from the roof. Unable to completely evade the objects in the air, he’d ended up with both wings pierced. Only after he made a soft landing did he learn that the “something” had been keen-edged thorns some twenty centimeters in length.

From there, several things had happened in quick succession. In the direction of Sengakuji to the south, a pillar of white light—most likely Metatron’s Trisagion—poured down from the sky. Then the circle of an aurora spread out once more from the roof of the building they were trying to reach, and the Demon City stage transformed into an utterly evil stage he’d never seen with

damage zones everywhere. And finally, the rose-colored duel avatar had appeared.

He'd made Lime Bell and Trilead flee to a building since they were taking damage from the thorns and set out to land the first blow. But the instant he stepped hard onto the dense thorns covering the road, they pierced the armor of the bottoms of his feet, stopping his movement. That was when the rose avatar dropped down from the building and started chatting with him. So.

Faced with the third of the Seven Dwarves, Rose Milady, Haruyuki tried to take in the current situation. The fact that Metatron's Trisagion had fired meant that there was a good chance that Fuko and the others on the Sengakuji grounds had managed to regenerate. And the Oscillatory side would have taken serious damage. He couldn't imagine that even Snow Fairy and Glacier Behemoth could survive such a superpowered laser attack. On the other hand, he was concerned about the stage that came with the new Change. It had been nine months already since Haruyuki became a Burst Linker, and he had reached level six; there couldn't have been that many stages left that were an absolute first for him. And yet, the fact that he had no knowledge of this one meant it was very likely the highest of the dark types—the Hell stage.

In Hell, the Archangel Metatron's powers were greatly weakened. Her main form wouldn't be able to escape this system-type restriction. But she wasn't even completely recovered from her previous outing *and* she had launched her Trisagion at full power once more. She had to have been suffering in this miasma.

This thought made him want to race off to Sengakuji right that second, but he couldn't ignore the tower before his eyes. The Burst Linker at the top was the very person with the bizarre power of the Change. And the fact that one of the Seven Dwarves had stayed back from the main battlefield to protect her proved that whoever it was in that tower, she was Oscillatory Universe's trump card. Haruyuki absolutely had to defeat her somehow before she disappeared again.

"I know painfully well that you're strong. But you're going to have to let me pass," Haruyuki announced, looking squarely into Rose Milady's white eye lenses.

A faint smile rose up on the face of the rose avatar as she gave voice to an unexpected question. “So the fact that you all are alive means you defeated Shadow Cloaker then, Corvus?”

After a moment’s confusion, he realized that this was the name of the ninja avatar they’d fought on the roof of the hotel near Shinagawa Station. When he nodded silently, Rose’s smile grew wider.

“Then you must be pretty strong, too. But you can’t beat me. This isn’t the usual Territories stage anymore. In an all-out slaughter like this, Oscillatory Universe isn’t—Brain Burst isn’t—such a sweet ride that kids like you can defeat the Seven Dwarves.”

Haruyuki could see that these words were not a threat but rather her true feelings on the matter. Rose Milady was undoubtedly a master on the level of Sky Raker and Blood Leopard, and against such an opponent, in a contest where anything goes—when it came down to a fight of Incarnate against Incarnate, Haruyuki didn’t have a ghost of a chance of winning. This was as clear as day.

But right about now, at Sengakuji, his regenerated comrades would have been starting their counterattack against Oscillatory Universe. He couldn’t let another Change get in the way of their fight. It was hard to imagine a greater adversity than the Hell stage, but he had no guarantee that this was the worst Oscillatory would bring against them.

I’ll push my way through!! Haruyuki was about to shout.

But before he could, Chiyuri cried out from where she had retreated to a building to the rear. “Crow! There!!”

Reflexively looking back, Haruyuki saw something incredible.

A massive shadow moving just on the other side of a group of low buildings. He couldn’t feel its heavy steps on the earth because it was soft-bodied like a squid, moving as though it were sliding along, twisting countless tentacles. It had to have been ten meters tall. If this was a Hell stage, then that had to have been a Devil-class Enemy, the kind the Blue King had mentioned at the meeting of the Seven Kings. Despite the fact that Haruyuki and his comrades must have been in its aggro range, it didn’t so much as glance at them on its journey straight south.

Haruyuki spotted a silver crown embedded in the devil's tapered head. Just like the Enemy encamped at Shinagawa Station, it was under the control of Oscillatory Universe, and now it was headed for Sengakuji. To wipe out the regenerated members of Nega Nebulus once more.

"Say, Corvus?" Rose Milady called, and Haruyuki turned around once more. Clad in a red that was almost too vivid, the avatar turned so that the silver needles decorating her body shone as she spoke in a kind and patient way. "There's nothing else you can do with the power you have. Leave right away with your two friends there. Flee to somewhere with no Enemies and hide there until it's all over. You three alone might make it."

Haruyuki understood that these words, too, were not a threat nor any kind of bravado, but rather a genuine warning. But he couldn't listen to it. If he ran now, he would have no longer been a Burst Linker even if he managed to survive.

Instead, he caught her eye lenses once more and asked, "What exactly does Oscillatory Universe—does the White King want? What is she trying to make happen in the Accelerated World by creating the Armor of Catastrophe, the ISS kits, and then this new armor?"

"The end and the beginning. That's all I can say right now."

"The end...and the beginning?" Haruyuki couldn't begin to imagine what this meant; it was just too abstract. But if there was even a one-in-ten-thousand chance that the members of the White Legion were even remotely just in their purpose, he could never agree with the idea of sacrificing the members of his Legion to that end. Absolutely not.

"Thank you for the warning," he replied quietly, then lowered his stance into a ready position. "But we are never going to see eye to eye. I can't run away now."

"No? Too bad. I also can't allow you to pass." Rose gently raised a hand.

Chiyuri and Lead called to him from behind.

"Crow! Me too!"

"I will also fight, Crow!"

Haruyuki turned toward them and thrust out his left hand. Given that neither were metal colors, just stepping onto the thorny ground would cause them serious damage. The road to the tower was narrow, enclosed by tall walls on either side; there was no way to evade the damage zones. But with this hand, he communicated not only his intent that they should leave the fight to him, but also his impromptu strategy.

Of course, just like in the real world, you couldn't use telepathy in the Accelerated World. There *were* abilities that allowed the transmission of thoughts in ways other than vocal, but neither Haruyuki, Chiyuri, nor Lead possessed any of those.

However. Any number of times now, Haruyuki had experienced something he could only see as a mental connection.

The voices of Fuko and Chiyuri when they'd charged into the battle to rescue Ardor Maiden from the altar of the God Suzaku. Kuroyukihime's voice when he'd been swallowed up by the rage of the Armor of Catastrophe and tried to destroy the avatar of the Black King. And the voice of the Archangel Metatron that had guided and encouraged him so often.

He more or less understood the logic of this conversation through thought now. Most likely, it was brought about by what Metatron called a link—a direct connection on the Highest Level. Something resembling the link established between Metatron and Haruyuki had been generated instantaneously with Kuroyukihime, Fuko, and the others, and these links could transmit thoughts. They were so small they didn't begin to compare with his connection to Metatron, but he had to have one with Chiyuri and Lead, too. If in this moment alone, even just one small thought could reach them, then he could see a chance of winning, albeit a faint one.

Unlike Snow Fairy, Haruyuki couldn't yet shift to the Highest Level under his own power. But he imagined this link in that world where there was no time or distance that bound him to Chiyuri and Lead and sent out a focused thought.

A second later, their actual voices reached his ears.

"...Got it."

"Understood."

He didn't know if they were responding simply to his gesture to hold them back or to his thought. But he had faith that he'd reached them and brought his hand down.

Once he drew Lucid Blade, Rose Milady said nothing further but simply stood quietly, her hand in the air, fingers loosely splayed.

There were eight meters between them. He couldn't find any real opening to make a slash attack, but the seconds would only pass by pointlessly unless he moved. Exhaling and then inhaling, he brandished his sword.

"Nngh!!" Haruyuki leapt off the ground with the tip of his foot. The sharp thorns pierced his sole, and the fierce pain was accompanied by a drop in his health gauge, but he ignored both of these. He took another step, and yet another at a trot, getting into position for a slash attack.

Rose still didn't move. She wasn't fleeing or defending or aiming for a counterattack; she was just standing there.

In the compressed time, the first thing he sensed was a fragrance. A rich, bewitching, sweet scent. This was followed by color. A deep, almost wet green, and a red, vivid like blood. His surroundings had stopped being the black thorn-scape of the Hell stage and transformed into a garden of large roses blooming in every direction.

Finally, Rose's mouth moved as she uttered the attack: "*Secret Garden.*"

A thin, even redder overlay enveloped the already rose-red avatar.

Countless vines shot up from the green covering the ground at his feet and twisted around him. The downward swing of his blade stopped in midair, and he was frozen in place.

A restraining technique, he thought. And then innumerable needlelike thorns popped out of the vines that held him fast and dug deep into Silver Crow's armor.

"Nngh!"

A pain racked his body, so powerful that the pain of the Hell stage spikes stabbing into the soles of his feet didn't begin to compare, and his health gauge

dropped over 70 percent at once. Haruyuki moaned, unable to withstand it entirely, and he heard the voice of Rose, as gentle as ever.

“Sorry. I never know what kind of roses will blossom in the garden. The thorns of the red roses are quite painful, hmm? Don’t worry. I’ll make you comfortable soon enough.”

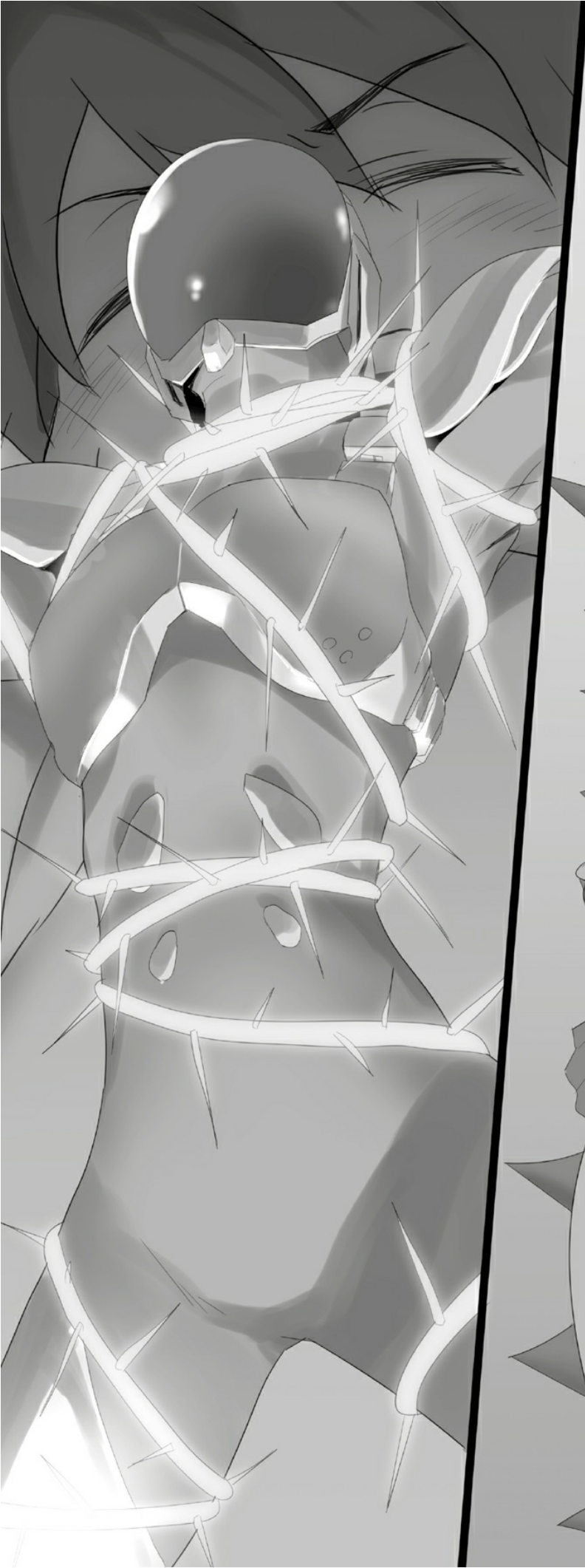
A new vine stretched up from his feet, and given that his health gauge had not stopped its precipitous decline, any new thorns would surely kill him instantly.

“Nngh...Unh!” Groaning, Haruyuki intently repositioned his grip on his beloved sword as it was about to fall from his hands.

The new vine crawled up from his hips to his chest. At a glance, it was only about a centimeter thick, but it was sturdy like a wire rope; he’d never be able to tear it off with the strength of his limbs alone. Only Incarnate techniques could fight back against Incarnate techniques, but as long as his arms were fixed in place, he couldn’t manage this with his Laser Sword. But Haruyuki mustered the last of his strength and tried to bring his sword down.

Rose’s eyes narrowed in something like pity.

In that instant, Haruyuki thought, *Now, Lead!!*



*

“Heavenly Stratus!!”

The crisp voice echoed through the air, and a mere millisecond later, an azure blast came flying in from the rear to cut a straight line across Silver Crow’s torso and the myriad vines.

If Trilead had aimed normally, however high-level his Incarnate technique might have been, Rose would no doubt have avoided it. But because of the blind spot created by Crow’s body, she was an instant too late to respond to the slashing attack that came flying in after slicing through Silver Crow. The crescent moon of blue light slammed into Rose’s chest and ripped deep into her torso. But it didn’t sever the high ranker’s body.

No good...One more hit. Haruyuki decided immediately, and with only his upper half free from the restraint of the vines, he brought down Lucid Blade. Normally, from this position, he wouldn’t have been able to put enough force into the swing to sever the hard armor of a duel avatar. He also had no time to switch Lucid Blade to lightsword mode. But the mysterious voice he’d heard during the fight with Glacier Behemoth was still burned into the back of his mind.

There’s no need for power in sword techniques in the Accelerated World. No matter how hard the item, there is a “seam” to sever.

The seam was like the grain of wood. There shouldn’t have been such a thing in the homogenous avatar armor, but he strangely understood what the voice was trying to say. The essence of a duel avatar was not metal or resin, but data. A vast set of coordinates.

Why could a sword cut the armor of an avatar or an Enemy? Because it was sharp. Because the power was concentrated in so few coordinates that it made the sword sharp. The extreme of this was Graphite Edge’s dual swords with blades on the molecular level. In which case, to cut a target, Haruyuki must aim not for a surface, but a line. And not a line, but a point. The logic being that the localized cutting power generated by the damage calculation would grow rapidly.

Unaware even of the pain that danced along his nerves after his avatar had its abdomen cut in two, Haruyuki focused all his mental energy and brought Lucid Blade down. The sharp tip precisely caught the end of a small needle extending from Rose's chest. He wasn't cutting it off with physical strength. The sensation was of sliding the coordinates of his beloved sword blade through the coordinates of his target. Fuse while cutting—a Way of the Flexible on the micro-level with a sword.

The extremely thin blade sliced through the metal needle as if through butter and kept sliding down into the naked body of the avatar. Already injured from Lead's earlier slicing attack, Rose smiled as though in admiration and closed her eyes.

At the same time, Haruyuki saw that his own health gauge was decreasing with terrifying speed. He would, in fact, die there.

...Unless.

“Citron Caaaaaaaalllll!!”

Chiyuri's voice rang out, and a bell sounded as green light poured down and enveloped Haruyuki's body. The drop in his health gauge stopped with just a few pixels remaining and shuddered as though fighting against the system before steadily increasing again.

And then the avatar of Rose erupted in an explosion of red light and scattered.



“I’m not giving up yet,” Shihoko/Chocolat Puppeteer had declared to Magenta Scissor. It wasn't a lie. However hopeless the situation, she had no intention of throwing in the towel and falling to her knees.

But in this tight spot, tighter than any she'd been in so far, surrounded by ten evil Enemies, larger than anything she'd ever seen, with sharp thorns covering the ground, Shihoko was at a loss to find something she could actually *do*. She'd made a modest safe zone by freezing her Cocoa Fountain, but because of that, she was unable to produce her greatest weapon, the automatic fighting Chocopets, and her main body didn't have any long-distance firepower. All she

could do was stand protected in a circle of her more experienced comrades.

If nothing else, at least, she could tattoo her heart with the battle of Sky Raker, Blood Leopard, Black Lotus, and Magenta Scissor with her red overlay, trying to protect her. So that she wouldn't forget it even if the time were to come when she was no longer a Burst Linker. Shihoko opened her eye lenses wide.



Mihaya Kakei/Blood Leopard had questioned herself any number of times: *Why do I cherish Yuniko Kozuki/Scarlet Rain so much?*

It wasn't because they'd had a particularly special meeting. After the former Red King had lost all his points and left, Prominence split into several small groups, and people left one after another, weakening the Legion to the point where they soon wouldn't be able to avoid extinction. In this turbulent period, Niko had been desperately trying to protect herself and her few comrades. Her level was still low and her method of fighting clumsy, but her spirit alone had been hot, a conflagration. On what was probably a whim, Mihaya had joined Niko's team and shared her experience and techniques with her. At the time, she'd never dreamed that Niko would bring the Legion back together, reach level nine, and sit on the throne as the second Red King—plus take Mihaya on as Submaster.

In the midst of all this upheaval, an unshakable feeling when it came to Niko had appeared inside of Mihaya at some point. But what that feeling was, she still didn't really understand. It was different from the solidarity and gratitude she had for her parent and cousin Akira Himi/Aqua Current. And it was different from the respect and admiration she had for Fuko Kurasaki/Sky Raker, who was what she wanted to be as a Burst Linker. She just intently, earnestly cherished the younger girl.

In Japanese, the root of the word *cherish* meant *pressing in very close*, and this had apparently led to the meanings of *need for urgency*, *critical*, and *priceless*. When she thought about Niko, something urgent closed in on her heart, so she had nodded her head in great understanding when she'd come upon this root.

Maybe it was that the perilousness and ephemerality in this girl Niko that made Mihaya feel this way. Of all the kings, she was the only second, an extreme and powerful duel avatar completely specialized in super-long-distance firepower. The heavy responsibility of the Legion Master had been gradually forced upon her. And the real-world Yuniko made use of two different personas, most likely unconsciously. With so many unstable elements just barely balancing, Niko was quintessentially Niko.

Which was why Mihaya was secretly relieved that Prominence had merged with Nega Nebulus and that Niko had been appointed the new Legion's provisional Submaster. The pressure of Legion management would be shared with the Black King now—although it wasn't that she didn't feel insecure there in her own way—and she expected that the burden on her would be lighter now.

Even after they were caught that day in the White Legion's trap, the first thing she'd felt was not fear that she would lose all her points, but relief that Niko was not in the battlefield. Of course, she had no intention of simply being taken out, and she definitely had her eyes peeled for a chance to counterattack, but that was all the more so when she thought that Niko was safe.

Thus, when the pillar of light poured down on Sengakuji, the stage changed to Hell, the Devil-class Enemies appeared, and then Black Lotus stepped out onto the stage even though she was not supposed to be there; Mihaya had felt anticipation and unease at the same time. She wanted to see Niko one more time. She didn't want Niko to lose all her points.

Feeling as though conflicting feelings were toying with her, she was rooted to the spot, and the roar of the ten Enemies shook her body. The strange creatures were drawing in from all directions in the plaza. The Devil-class Enemies, which only appeared in a Hell stage, had a battle power on par with Legend-class. And if there were ten of them, then it was very much within the realm of possibility that Nega Nebulus would fight in earnest and still be wiped out, even with the Black King joining the fight. They had to create an escape route somehow, but there was no opening in the group of Enemies surrounding them.

Mihaya gritted her teeth, and Aqua Current hit her lightly with a clenched fist

covered in water. “Myah, this is the big moment.”

Even though she was normally called Pard in the Accelerated World, her parent dared to utter her real-world nickname.

Mihaya gently held her hand. “K.”

“We’ll create an opening. Aim for Ivory with Cannon,” Current said.

Mihaya’s eyes opened wide for a moment before she understood. Several of them, starting with the Black King, possessed long-distance Incarnate techniques that were more than sufficient to instantly kill Ivory Tower, but Ivory would render those Incarnate techniques useless. In which case, Mihaya likely possessed the most powerful long-distance special attack with the longest range of anyone there, so she had to take on the role of attacker.

But there was one major issue. Having just regenerated, Mihaya’s special-attack gauge was basically empty. That would have been the same for everyone there.

And of course, as only a parent could, Current spoke again, reading Mihaya’s thoughts. “Olive’ll do something about your gauge.”

“Something.” She couldn’t imagine what exactly he was going to do, but there wasn’t time to ask for details. “K.” Mihaya nodded again, and Akira nodded in return.

They had formed a circle with Chocolat Puppeteer, Bush Utan, and the other younger members in the center and were ready for the devils’ simultaneous attack. They had already cut the distance down to thirty meters, and now they approached from all directions like a black tsunami.

“Incarnate defenses are going to be canceled! Everyone, on my signal, attack the devils head-on!” Raker cried out.

Even if all fifteen used their most powerful special attacks, there was no way they could wipe out ten Devil classes, but that was not their aim. The goal was to blind Ivory with flashy lights and explosions, so that Mihaya could launch a special attack while his attention was elsewhere. She couldn’t imagine that the same strategy would work twice, so they had just this one chance.

“Mode Change,” she commanded in a quiet voice, and when she transformed into her leopard Beast Mode, she lowered herself to the ground and waited for her moment.

The earth shook harder with every step of the ten super-heavyweight Enemies, and the innumerable spikes growing there resonated in harmony, producing a bizarre sound.

“Now!!” Sky Raker called.

From the center of the circle, Olive Grab shouted, “Sacrificed Nectar!” His torso and four limbs, slender like poles, instantly swelled up into the shape of rugby balls—well, olives—and popped open. The better part of the avatar disappeared amid a waterfall of golden liquid, and Bush Utan caught the remaining head. The rain poured down on everyone in the area before evaporating.

This technique could only be described as a suicide bombing, and Mihaya was stunned into silence. But the true surprise came after that. Her nearly dry special-attack gauge rapidly increased. Even if he had to lose his entire body in exchange, this was an incredible technique, so incredible that it was almost out of balance with the price paid. He most likely had to sacrifice something else as well, but at the moment, she merely stopped at thanking him in her heart and waited for the right time.

Similarly fully charged, her comrades shouted as one.

“Lightning Cyan Spike!!”

“Flame Vortex!!”

“Flying Panheaaaaad!!”

“Ruthless Shear!!”

“Thousand Prickles!!”

“Colossal Horn!!”

“Cyanide Shot!!”

“Icilin Strike!!”

“Spiral!!”

“Wind Bullet!!”

“Vorpall Strike!!”

Multicolored light effects dyed the plaza, and eleven long-distance special attacks and Incarnate techniques shot forward, rippling outward and avoiding the ice cube. Powerful flashes and explosions pushed back the approaching herd of devils ever so slightly. But the quadruple bars of the top-class Enemies’ health gauges essentially didn’t drop. And it seemed that Ivory Tower had no intention of canceling out Incarnate attacks so long as they weren’t aimed at him; he wordlessly lorded over them, staff still raised in one hand. There wasn’t even a hint of carelessness or arrogance to be found in his gaze.

Keeping her body low within the circle, Mihaya glared at Ivory in vexation. Just one moment. All she needed was a single moment. If he would just look away...

Abruptly, in the midst of the explosions, she smelled strawberries again.

And then a voice from high above called out the name of a twelfth technique and proved that this was neither delusion nor hallucination.

“Coronal Mass Ejection!!”

Crimson flames ripped across the purple sky. A shower of missiles, shots from four Vulcan cannons, a volley of large-diameter laser cannons. All blended together into a storm of long-distance firepower that slammed into the devil with Ivory on its shoulder before exploding dramatically. The devil protected Ivory Tower with its hands, so he was essentially unharmed. But even he couldn’t ignore such a grand attack, and he turned his narrow gaze beyond Mihaya.

Restraining her own powerful desire to look back, Mihaya cried in the quietest possible voice, “Bloodshed Cannon!!”

Her fully charged special-attack gauge disappeared, and a gun barrel of red light formed around her crouched body. With a clap of thunder, Mihaya became a bullet and was fired.



“I do sincerely apologize, Crow.” Trilead put both arms against his sides and started to bow deeply, but Haruyuki hurriedly moved to stop him.

“There’s nothing for you to apologize for, Lead.”

“The fact that I inflicted such an injury on you is due to nothing other than my own inexperience.”

“No, no. I *asked* you to do it. There was no other way to take down Rose Milady.”

“But...” Lead hung his head.

“That’s right!” Chiyuri slapped him on the back. “We won thanks to you, Lead! And I healed H—I mean, Crow’s injuries. It’s no biggie! We’re all good!”

Haruyuki wanted to protest that, actually, it had hurt an unbelievable amount, but of course, he held his tongue. Instead, he stroked the torso that had been split in two with Lead’s Incarnate technique, but there wasn’t so much as a scratch remaining on his metal armor.

“Still...I know I’m late to the party here, but you—your Citron Call is seriously incredible,” he muttered.

Chiyuri blinked a few times before saying in an exasperated voice, “Yeah, you really are late to that party.”

“No, it’s just like, it’s plenty wild in the Normal Duel Field, too, but...When it’s applied to the Unlimited Neutral Field, it’s like perpetual motion...” He trailed off.

“You’re not using words right.”

Trilead finally smiled just a little, and the tension left his shoulders.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Haruyuki was about to put a hand on Lead’s back when he heard the thunder of a number of ferocious and terrifying roars, the likes of which he’d never heard before, and the air shuddered and shook. Judging from the reverberation, the noise came from a few hundred meters away, but the chill racing up his spine made his entire body stiffen up.

“Wh-what was that?!” Chiyuri cried.

“That super-huge Enemy from before,” Haruyuki responded in a hoarse voice. “The fight at Sengakuji’s started.”

“Then we gotta get going!”

Yeah, let’s go. Haruyuki desperately swallowed the words back down.

The truth was, he wanted to fly right back to Sengakuji and add his strength to that of his regenerated comrades. But at the top of the tower before them was the Burst Linker with the power to interfere with the entire battlefield. If they let her be, she might put them in an even more terrible situation than they were already in. That was exactly why they’d decided to take on the do-or-die fight against the tower’s guardian, Rose Milady.

“Bell, Lead. Go back to Sengakuji and help the others. I’ll go to that tower,” he announced heavily.

Chiyuri reflexively started to argue but then pursed her lips tightly shut. She nodded silently and then said, “Okay. All fine and good to go back. But the thorns on the ground...”

Haruyuki glanced back. They were standing inside a building a little ways off from where they’d fought Rose Milady. Dark, lustrous spikes grew densely on the road outside, and nonmetal colors Chiyuri and Lead would take damage simply by standing on them. If they ran the three hundred or so meters to Sengakuji, they might die before they made it there. Of course, their special-attack gauges would build up in proportion to the damage they took, so it was possible for her to heal with Citron Call. But there, too, was a serious problem. Choir Chime, the large Enhanced Armament equipped on Lime Bell’s left arm, was nearly twice as long as her forearm, so she couldn’t turn it on herself—in other words, she couldn’t heal her own self.

Haruyuki earnestly set his mind to figuring out if there was some other way.

“I’ll carry her,” Trilead declared suddenly.

Haruyuki was surprised, but Chiyuri threw her head back in shock, crying, “Whaaaaaat?!”

“B-but, Lead, I mean, you’ll take dam—”

Lead cut Haruyuki off with a cool smile.

“It’s all right. Master Graph used to make me do things like run across magma before.”

This could have been a joke or the truth. Haruyuki managed to return a faint smile and shook off his hesitation. “Got it. Thanks, Lead. Take care of Bell...and everyone else.”

“I will. I promise,” Trilead replied crisply, turning his back to Bell as he crouched down.

With Chiyuri on his back, Lead practically flew along the thorny road, and Haruyuki looked up at the southern sky once more. The buildings blocked his view, so he couldn’t see it directly, but the sound of explosions came intermittently from the direction of Sengakuji. There was no doubt that Fuko and the others were fighting hard against the Devil-class Enemies.

Master, Shinomiya, Akira, Pard, Ash, Metatron...I’ll be there soon. Please just hang on a little longer! Haruyuki called out to his friends in his heart and then turned on his heel.

Before him, a rose-red death marker was spinning slowly. Haruyuki couldn’t see her, but Rose Milady was somewhere nearby in a ghost state. Most likely, if she’d really been serious, she could have killed Haruyuki, Chiyuri, and Trilead with a snap of her fingers. If she’d been like the ninja he’d fought near Shinagawa Station and hadn’t said a word to him from the start, if she’d attacked with her full power without bothering with a restraining technique, he wouldn’t have been able to handle it.

Haruyuki didn’t understand why she hadn’t. But he bowed his head silently toward the marker before spreading his restored wings and taking off from the thorn-covered ground. The tower rose up at the end of the narrow road like a black lance. Aiming for its tip, he shot upward.

The very top of the tower was a small circular terrace, wrapped in gray miasma. In one corner, he found a human shadow very much like a girl curled up holding her knees. A slender staff lay at her side. Her dress-type armor was peach with a hint of purple in it. Translucent-ish platinum-white hair flowed down her back, and glass high heels encased her slender feet. He couldn’t see

her face beneath her large hat.

The girl avatar didn't lift her face even after Haruyuki landed on one edge of the terrace. Although she had to have heard the sound of his metal wings vibrating, her thin shoulders and the fingers gripping her knees didn't so much as twitch. He felt nothing remotely like battle lust coming from her, so he felt confident that he could've gotten the upper hand by drawing his sword and attacking. Instead, however, he walked over to her slowly and knelt down.

"Um. I'm Silver Crow from Nega Nebulus."

The pale-peach avatar still made no movement, but a few seconds later, a thin voice reached him. "If you're here, that means you won against Rose, huh?"

Haruyuki had the sudden feeling he'd heard the voice before, but he couldn't place it. After thinking a little, he shook his head. "No, I don't think I won. Rose could've killed us, but she didn't."

The girl was silent for another few seconds before she finally lifted her head. Her face mask was so delicate, elegant, and anguished that it seemed impossible for it to be less matched to the words *duel avatar*. Her citron-colored eye lenses stared at Haruyuki for just an instant and then were lowered once more. "I'm Orchid Oracle."

The avatar name very much suited the completely non-battle-type figure. And he felt it was also a pair with Rose, who had been guarding her.

Still not really understanding what he wanted to do with this person or what he wanted to say, Haruyuki dipped his head once more. "It's nice to meet you, Oracle. Um, I..."

But before he could find the words with which to continue, she said something unexpected.

"This isn't the first time we've met."

"Huh?" Frowning beneath his goggles, he stared hard at the avatar once more. It was true that this wasn't the first time he'd seen her. He had seen her twice before, once when she changed the Territories stage to the Unlimited Neutral Field with her Incarnate technique Paradigm Revolution and once when

she changed the Demon City to the Hell stage. But he had only caught a glimpse of her from afar. They'd never spoken, so he wasn't wrong in offering the greeting "Nice to meet you." Was he?

When Oracle spoke again, her statement was a thousand times more shocking.

"You and I have met before...Haruyuki Arita."

Cracked in the real!! Reflexively bracing himself, Haruyuki was on the verge of clenching his hands into fists when he was overcome once more with a powerful sense of déjà vu—or rather a sense that he already knew, and he froze. In his ear, he heard the echo of a faint voice from far away.

"Oh...Did you need something?"

It had been ages and ages since he had heard that voice. From back before he was even a Burst Linker.

After appearing out of the blue in the squash game corner of the Umesato local net, Kuroyukihime had asked him, "Don't you want to go further, boy...to accelerate?" and invited, "If you do, come to the lounge at lunch tomorrow." And Haruyuki had mustered up his infinitesimal courage and visited the school cafeteria lounge.

There was an unspoken rule that this area was off-limits to seventh graders, and when he entered it, the eyes the older students turned on him were perplexed, looking at the rare beast of a lost child. But there had been one person who very kindly asked him what he needed there. Short, fluffy hair. Gentle smile. The scent of black tea wafting around her. The treasurer of the Umesato Junior High student council, Megumi Wakamiya.

"Wakamiya?" he asked in a voice that was not a voice, and Orchid Oracle assented with the faintest of smiles.

Suddenly, it felt as if the floor at his feet—no, the field itself—was crumbling to pieces around him, and he steadied himself with a hand on the floor.

Megumi Wakamiya was a Burst Linker...and a member of Oscillatory Universe. That meant that Kuroyukihime's closest friend was an underling of her greatest enemy, White Cosmos.

“But...That’s not possible. That can’t be.” Shaking his head, Haruyuki tried desperately to deny the name he himself had uttered. “If Wakamiya was a Burst Linker, then her name would show up on the matching list at Umesato. There’s no way no one would notice for over two years. And...And...”

Suddenly, transparent liquid filled his eyes beneath his goggles, warping his field of view.

But there’s no need for a duel avatar to have the ability to shed tears, he thought, perplexed, in one corner of his mind.

“And even if you were her...,” he continued, “that means you were lying to Kuroyukihime all this time? Were you pretending to be her friend up to today, waiting for the moment when you’d betray her?”

“...No.” Orchid Oracle—Megumi Wakamiya—denied the charge, a hint of emotion bleeding into her voice. “I wasn’t lying to her or anything like that. I’ve always been Kuroyuki’s friend—her *best* friend. I love her. I want us to be close forever.”

“So then...why?! Why didn’t you say anything before today?!” Haruyuki pressed her.

“I can’t say,” Megumi replied, her voice shaking slightly. “It’s just...I’m a Burst Linker who lost all her points. I had the Brain Burst program forcibly uninstalled and lost all my memories of the Accelerated World.”

It took a little time for these words to take on any meaning inside his mind. He took several deep breaths before asking hoarsely, “You lost...all your points? So then...who is the you that’s here right now?”

This time, Megumi was silent.

The fierce sounds of battle continued from Sengakuji to the south. His Nega Nebulus comrades were engaged in a terrible struggle against the Devil-class Enemies. Suppressing the urge to go running to them that very second, Haruyuki waited for Megumi’s answer.

“The White King has been studying how to regenerate Burst Linkers for a long time,” she replied finally.

“S-studying regeneration? But doesn’t the White King have the special attack Resurrect by Compassion for regeneration?” And then it clicked in his mind. Megumi wasn’t talking about regenerating *duel avatars*. She was talking about regenerating *Burst Linkers*. “D-do you mean...a way to bring back Burst Linkers who’ve lost all their points?”

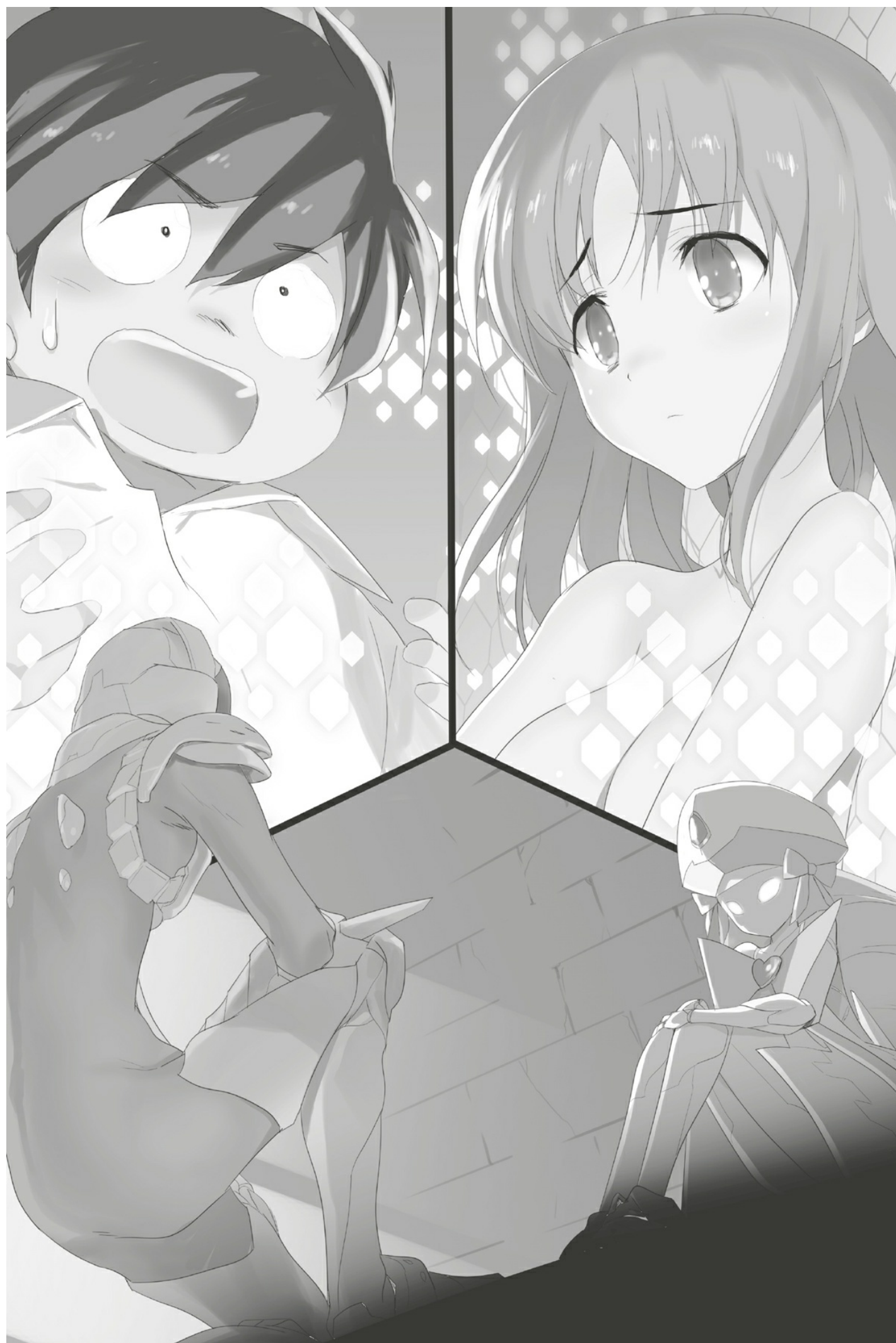
“Yes. There are already a number of limited successes. You would know that, Arita.”

“Successes,” Haruyuki murmured, and the words Takumu had once spoken to him at the main headquarters of the Acceleration Research Society came back to him.

What if the memories of Burst Linkers at total point loss aren’t annihilated but taken from them? They’re pulled from the head of the Burst Linker and saved somewhere in the Brain Burst central server. And then someone—probably a member of the Acceleration Research Society we don’t know yet—called up those memories somehow...

“The first Red King, Red Rider, and...the Acceleration Research Society’s Dusk Taker?” Haruyuki croaked.

Megumi nodded silently, pulling her knees even more tightly against her body. “I only just heard about all that from Milady while we were on standby here. But I think they’re temporarily regenerating them by downloading the memories left in the Brain Burst central server into a ‘vessel.’ With Red Rider, it was an Enhanced Armament. And with Dusk Taker, it’s a separate Burst Linker. But it looks like the White King still can’t manage true regeneration—she can’t bring back the memories of a Burst Linker at total loss as is and reinstall the BB program.”



Of course she couldn't. That was the greatest principle that was the foundation of Brain Burst, and if true regeneration were possible, the existence of Burst Points themselves would lose all meaning. But if it *were* possible, then it might be able to erase the pain Kuroyukihime felt after pushing Red Rider to total point loss with a surprise attack, the hurt in Niko's heart from judging Cherry Rook with her own hand.

"So then...how are you...?" Haruyuki asked, a vast fear and faint hope in his heart.

But Megumi Wakamiya hung her head once more and slowly shook it from side to side. "That...That alone I don't know. Not me. And not Rose, either."

"Y-you don't know?"

"No. I got my memories from my time as a Burst Linker back today, when I went to the school library to return a book I'd borrowed after the closing ceremony and student council meeting. I guess I lost consciousness for a minute or two at a carrel desk, but the library was empty, so no one noticed."

"At the library? So then you weren't connected to the global net, right?"

"Right. Maybe they came into my Neurolinker through the local net or maybe a program had been set up to activate on a timer...Either way, when I came to, the memories of when I was Orchid Oracle were already in my head. And there was an order from the White King with basic information about Nega Nebulus on my virtual desktop."

"A-an order," Haruyuki stammered. "What...?"

"I was to move to Minato Three by four o'clock, and once the Territories started, I was to follow the instructions of Ivory Tower," she replied slowly.

He realized that these utterly simple instructions hid a terrifying truth. The White King had indeed seen through Nega Nebulus's strategy. And if he were to believe Megumi, she hadn't been feeding the king information as a spy, which meant that White Cosmos had set up this elaborate trap based on nothing but a hunch.

"So then, shifting everyone from the Territories to the Unlimited Neutral

Field, and changing the Demon City to the Hell stage, that was on Ivory Tower's instructions?" Haruyuki asked, dumbfounded, but then layered another question on top before Megumi could reply. "No, to begin with, before that... Why are you following the White King's orders? Just because you got your memories back doesn't mean you forgot about Kuroyukihime, right?"

"There's no way I could forget Kuroyuki." Her voice was tinged with sadness, and Haruyuki couldn't hold back any longer.

"So then...! Why did you betray her?!" he shouted. "Is the White King more important to you than Kuroyukihime? Or is it because you're afraid of the Judgment?!"

"That's not it," she protested. "I already lost all my points once. I'm not fixated on my old Legion Master or Brain Burst after all this time."

"So then why?!" he demanded.

"That's...That's." Megumi clutched her hands tightly together in front of her chest, as if a knife had been plunged into her heart, and squeezed out in a pained voice, "It's because I was told...if the White King's research is completed, someone I care about could also be recovered."

"Someone...you care about?"

"Of course, I love Kuroyuki. She's my best friend. But...I care just as much about this person. I mean...she's my parent, after all. I can't compare them."

"Your parent," Haruyuki parroted, staring at Megumi's face mask.

Droplets of light spilled one after another from her citron eye lenses and melted into the air, disappearing.

He couldn't think of anything to say to that. Because for him, too, his parent Kuroyukihime was the very reason that he continued to be a Burst Linker. Not knowing what more he should say, Haruyuki bit his lip.

"I haven't had any memories as a Burst Linker in the two years and four months since I started at Umesato," Megumi said, the tension in her avatar easing slightly. "But the reason I knew that you were Silver Crow, Arita...is because no one is more worthy of being Kuroyuki's child than you."

He cocked his head to one side unconsciously at the unexpected statement. "Me?"

"She trusts you, and you care so deeply for her, too. Even without my memories of Brain Burst, I was a little jealous of you." She laughed faintly and turned her eye lenses toward the purple sky. "My parent was also a wonderful person. Totally different from Kuroyuki, though. But she was kind and strong and had big dreams. But maybe because her dreams were too big...A bunch of Burst Linkers who've forgotten her now caught her in a surprise attack, and she lost all her points in an Unlimited EK."

"Her dreams were too big?" Haruyuki repeated, a memory locked deep inside tickling him a little.

"Yeah. She was trying to create a way to avoid total point loss by having a lot of Burst Linkers lend points to one another. So that someday, everyone in this world could laugh and have fun with this game Brain Burst."

Haruyuki felt a shock that numbed him to the core and half groaned, "What...? That's...the cooperative Legion...But..."

Megumi reacted instantly, wildly. "H-how do you know about that, Arita?!"

"H-how?" After a moment's confusion, he remembered Megumi Wakamiya had been away from the Accelerated World for over two years. Even if she had guessed that Haruyuki was Kuroyukihime's child, she would of course have had no way of knowing that Silver Crow had been the sixth Chrome Disaster or that he had shared part of the memories of the first Chrome Disaster, Chrome Falcon.

But he didn't have time to explain everything about the Armor of Catastrophe, so instead of answering Megumi's question, he focused on confirming the question in his mind. "Is your parent Saffron Blossom?"

"How did you know that?" Surprise colored her face mask once more. "She lost all her points in an Unlimited EK long, long before you became a Burst Linker."

"Wait a second. If Saffron is your parent, then there's no way the White King would regenerate her. I mean...I mean." Haruyuki saw again the scene of

Saffron Blossom being killed over and over and over by the Legend-class Enemy Jormungand while three Burst Linkers watched coldheartedly. “I mean, the one who pushed Saffron Blossom to total point loss with the Unlimited EK was White Cosmos herself.”

Megumi didn’t react immediately.

Her face mask, devoid of expression, moved back and forth over and over, in childish refusal. Her eye lenses flashed irregularly, and anticipating Zero Fill, Haruyuki reflexively moved to touch her hand, but she pulled her body away as if rejecting his comfort.

“No.” Her voice was hoarse, dry. “That’s a lie. The White King...She protected me when I had nowhere to go; she taught me so much...She said she’d bring Saffron back once she finishes her research.”

“That’s the lie. The White King lied to Kuroyukihime, too, and set it up so that she would drive Red Rider to total point loss. She spreads terror and false hope like poison; she’s manipulated so many people!”

“No...Stop it! Just stop it!!” Megumi put her hands over her ears and cried out in an even more pained voice, “I betrayed Kuroyuki to bring Saffron back to life. I did it even though I knew we couldn’t go back to being friends! This is the only path for me now!!”

“That’s...That’s not true!!” Lost in the moment, Haruyuki reached out and grabbed Orchid’s slender arm. “I mean, I betrayed Kuroyukihime. I fused with the Armor of Catastrophe, and I lost control of myself. I attacked her. But...no matter how battered she got, Kuroyukihime didn’t try to fight back. She believed in me; she accepted every blow. I’m sure she would do the same for you, Wakamiya. I mean...I mean, the two of you are...”

Haruyuki couldn’t find the words to express the relationship between the two young women. Megumi had said “friends,” but he felt that this didn’t fully tell the tale of what existed between them. Like Saffron Blossom and Chrome Falcon, they were bound by unconditional trust and compassion. Whatever trick the White King sent their way, even if the meeting between Megumi and Kuroyukihime itself was one of her schemes, they had cultivated and built a bond that absolutely couldn’t be spoiled.

“Saffron...Falcon!” Haruyuki unconsciously called out to the two ancestral Burst Linkers. *“Please help Orchid Oracle—your child!!”*

The phenomenon that occurred in that instant was impossible for Haruyuki himself to perceive, but in the Brain Burst central server—the Main Visualizer—a temporary link was established between the quantum circuits dedicated to Haruyuki and the longsword-type Enhanced Armament known by the name Star Caster. He could no longer touch this Enhanced Armament, given that it was sealed away inside a certain player home in the form of a card, but inside the server—on the Highest Level—distance and obstacles in the field held no meaning.

Star Caster contained the memories of a Burst Linker who had long ago lost all her points and left the Accelerated World. It held the memories of Saffron Blossom, who had championed the idea of a cooperative Legion as one of the Originators.

Abruptly, a breeze blew in carrying a sweet, refreshing scent and cleared away the miasma of the Hell stage. Or so he felt.

Megumi Wakamiya opened her eyes wide, and then Haruyuki heard it, too. A voice with a childish note to it that somehow gave the impression of deep caution and calm.

“Okki, I’m sorry for making you so sad. And thank you. I couldn’t do much for you as a parent, but you didn’t forget me.”

“H-how could I forget you, Fron?!” Megumi shouted, pulling away the hands that covered her ears. “It was you, wasn’t it? You guided me to the Accelerated World in Okinawa! I...I miss you! If I could just see you again. I...I—!”

The voice, youthful and solemn at the same time, responded.

“I’m sorry. I can’t see you anymore, Okki. But I’ll always be watching over you. When you’re accelerated—and when you’re not. Always.”

“So...do what you think is right, Okki. Do what you can now for the sake of the person you love...”

The voice faded and disappeared.

“Fron!!” Megumi reached out a hand, trying to grab hold of something that wasn’t there, and eventually lowered it slowly. The tears that fell one after another from her eye lenses hit Haruyuki’s chest and scattered into a modest light before disappearing.

A remarkably strong explosion sounded from the direction of Sengakuji, and the slender tower shook.

Once the shaking had stopped, Megumi raised her face mask. “Arita— No, Silver Crow. Take me to the battlefield.”

“Bloodshed Cannon!!” Mihaya shouted under her breath, but with the maximum of fighting spirit.

Her avatar became a bullet fired diagonally upward, piercing the orange flames of the explosions and the gray of the miasma.

Blood Leopard’s sole and greatest long-distance attack, the origin of her nickname Bloody Kitty. If it made a direct hit, it would shatter even the heavy armor of green-type avatars, but if it missed its mark, and she plunged into a building or the ground, she would die instantly. Since she was aiming for an enemy who was high up, if he dodged her, she would just keep flying up into the sky, but her Fall Protection ability likely wouldn’t be able to fully absorb the resulting damage. Thus, Mihaya had intently waited for the moment when Ivory Tower’s attention was elsewhere.

The special attack Coronal Mass Ejection that had given the human-type devil upon whose shoulder Ivory rode such a fierce blow was Scarlet Rain’s trump card. And anyway, there was no way that Mihaya would mistake Niko’s voice for anyone else’s. It wasn’t just the Black King, Kuroyukihime; the Red King had also dived into this battlefield. And she had released all her firepower at just the right moment to draw Ivory’s eyes.

Dammit. Reckless as always. Once we burst out, I’m really going to let her have it. This thought flitted through the back of her mind as Mihaya charged forward in bullet form. Just thinking about Niko, her spirit was surprisingly brimming with energy. Her whole body sang.

I will not miss. I'll smash you to dust!

With unwavering confidence, Mihaya pierced the flames of the explosion and closed in on her target. Ivory finally caught sight of her, but it was already too late. There wasn't a Burst Linker in the Accelerated World that could avoid Bloodshed Cannon at this point. Or so she thought.

Suddenly, Ivory Tower's left arm was dyed a lustrous black, deeper than darkness.

"Layered Armor." As he called the technique name, he transformed into several thin, ink-black panels along the trajectory of the Cannon.

The shock from colliding with the first panel threatened to knock her consciousness out of her avatar, and Mihaya gritted her teeth. A sound like breaking glass rang out, and the thin panel shattered. But two more appeared immediately, and once again, the shock of collision was unbelievable. Three, four black panels. Each time she smashed one, Blood Leopard's armor was damaged, and her health gauge dropped precipitously.

Five panels. Six. On the seventh, her charge finally stopped. Falling as she returned from bullet form to her original leopard-shaped avatar, Mihaya caught sight of Ivory.

Except—it wasn't Ivory Tower, the fourth of Oscillatory Universe's Seven Dwarves and the full proxy of the White King. His entire body had transformed into a bizarre figure, several matte-black thin panels layered in the shape of cooling fins. His head, too, was a collection of black panels, with no face mask. But from between the gap between two panels, Mihaya could sense a definite gaze watching her.

Lowering his left arm—70 percent destroyed—the layered avatar shook the face that was not a face from side to side as he spoke in a curiously calm voice. "My goodness. And I was planning to hide from you, even submitting to dying alongside you repeatedly in Brinicle."

The voice and tone were totally different from Ivory Tower's. She could only assume it was a different person. Or rather, Mihaya *knew* this black duel avatar.

The shadow user who kidnapped Scarlet Rain at the end of the attack on

Midtown Tower. The vice president of the Acceleration Research Society, Black Vise.

Had he stepped in for Ivory Tower between the moment Bloodshed Cannon launched and the bullet arrived? No, that was impossible. There definitely hadn't been time for that, and Mihaya had seen it with her own eyes. To defend against Bloodshed Cannon, Ivory's left arm had turned into several black panels.

But on the other hand, it was absolutely impossible for one duel avatar to turn into another duel avatar. It was completely different from changing into Beast Mode like Magenta Scissor, Moose, and Thistle or equipping Enhanced Armament like Niko and Raker. This was a total transformation.

In the reaction of the defense against her Cannon, Mihaya had fallen without being able to take on a passive posture to fall safely, but a cushion of water caught her. Then she was caught in Aqua Current's arms, but forgetting to offer her thanks, Mihaya stared up at the layered avatar on the devil's shoulder as if to burn a hole in him.



In his unharmed right hand, he gripped the staff to control the Enemies. There was no sign of Ivory Tower in the area. And on Vise's right hip, there remained a deep wound from the Black King's Vorpal Strike. Ivory Tower really *had* transformed into Vise. Or had Vise transformed into Ivory?

It was just too much, and Current, Raker, Maiden, and the others were speechless. The first to react was the Black King.

"*You...Black Vise!!*" Black Lotus turned the sword of a hand up toward the layered avatar. "So Ivory Tower is your true identity!!"

Vise shrugged lightly. "Now, now. Why would you think that? The opposite is just as possible."

"No, it's not," the Black King snapped. "Because the system has never once displayed the avatar name Black Vise. That name is nothing more than what you call yourself!!"

"I see, I see. So you won't forgive the doubling of the black color? Quite rude, hmm?" Vise laughed, sounding more than comfortable, and then adroitly spun the staff in his right hand. At some point, the surrounding devil Enemies had stopped moving once more. In the pressure-filled silence, a calm voice flowed, strongly reminiscent of a schoolteacher. "But, well, since it's come to this, it seems I'll have no choice but to also have you retire from the Accelerated World, Black King. I shall gladly take on the vacated color name."

He brought the staff, spinning like a baton, to a stop and raised it leisurely. The silver sphere embedded at the top glittered ominously.

"This time, most certainly, we will end this. Whoops, before that." Vise moved the staff lightly, and one of the devils launched a ball of roaring flames from its mouth. It hit the ice cube that Mihaya and the others had tried not to destroy and instantly melted it.

The ice came pouring down with a roar, and from inside, Snow Fairy said in her childlike voice, "Aah, we finally made it out!"

Glacier Behemoth shook his massive bulk, sending water droplets flying. "So in the end, it comes to this, hmm?" he said, half sighing. With Fairy still on his head, he stepped back along the thorny ground. Slipping through a gap

between the devils, he retreated to a building on the west side of the plaza and prepared himself to watch over the end of the fight with the remaining Oscillatory members.

The fifteen members of Nega Nebulus stayed locked together and didn't move. They *couldn't* move. None of them, including Mihaya, had anything left to try to turn the tables. The special-attack gauges that Olive Grab had charged for them with his do-or-die suicide-bomb technique were all used up, and the chocolate pond at their feet defending them from thorn damage was starting to melt.

"Our only choice is to use our Incarnate techniques together at the same time," Akira murmured in her ear, still holding Mihaya.

That was the only means left to them. But most likely, the instant he saw any overlay, Black Vise would turn back into Ivory Tower and try to wipe out their Incarnate with Imaginary Time. Their chances were poor, but they would have to set up a final contest by holding on until Vise showed them an opening once more.

"Now, members of Nega Nebulus. It is time to say farewell." Black Vise casually brought down the staff in his right hand.

The momentarily frozen devils flashed their variously shaped eyes all at once, emitting strange cries from many mouths, as they closed in like black walls from all directions.

"Like I'm gonna let yoooooooouuuuuu!!"

The voice that rang out did not belong to any of the fifteen surrounded by devils. An armed red tank charged in from the north of the plaza, wildly firing bullets and missiles. Dreadnought, the transformed mode of the Red King's Enhanced Armament Invincible. As a duel avatar, it boasted the largest scale in the Accelerated World, surpassing even Glacier Behemoth, but it didn't begin to compare with the ten-meter-tall Devil-class Enemies.

Even so, with her charge, which appeared to be the last of whatever power remained to her, Niko created a slight gap in the circle of devils and shoved the tank through to fly into the center of the circle. She immediately returned to Fortress mode, providing cover for the fifteen members of Nega Nebulus as she

spread out two massive armaments like arms.

Massive swords, lances, fists, and tentacles thundered down. With each fierce blow, an explosion ripped into the seams and joints of Invincible's armor, and parts began to peel away and fall off.

"Aki, let me down!" Mihaya shouted, trying to move carefully with the aftershocks of the violent pain of Bloodshed Cannon still rippling through her.

But Aqua Current kept Mihaya tightly in her arms and activated an Incarnate technique. "Phase Trans: Adamant!!"

The flowing water armor that covered Current's body gathered in her arms and froze to create gauntlets with large blades.

And then Invincible erupted in a remarkably fierce explosion and scattered in all directions. The large armaments of the sides and the missile pods broke up into enormous pieces in midair and disappeared, and the leg parts followed them after too many repeated blows. The cockpit block managed to survive somehow, but without any mobility of its own, it dropped to the ground.

"Rain! You okay?!" the Black King called, green overlay in both her arms.

"Yeah, basically!" Niko's voice came from the cockpit. "I know you said to cover the girl, but I can't move no more!"

"Understood. Leave the rest to me! Overdrive! Mode Green!" The parting lines that ran all across the body of the Black King emitted a vivid-green light.

That light had not yet disappeared when Black Vise brought The Luminary down, and the devils attacked as one once more. Roars. Impacts.

Aqua Current's right arm stopped a very large sword and then flew off from the shoulder and shattered into pieces. Cracks ran along the Black King's dual swords, and Cyan Pile's pile driver exploded. Not to mention, two death effects erupted upward, purple and gray; Moose, protecting Thistle Porcupine, and Ash Roller, protecting Bush Utan, had fallen. And there was no doubt that the members who managed to survive had seen their health gauges drop significantly, too.

...One more time. She would use Bloodshed Cannon one more time and take

out Black Vise. That was the only way of turning this around that came to mind. But Mihaya's armor was battered and cracked, and the damage reached down to the naked body of her avatar. If Current hadn't been holding her up, just staying on her feet would have been difficult. On top of that, she needed 20 percent more in her special-attack gauge.

"Aki, I don't have enough in my gauge. Cut me with that sword," she said to Current.

The avatar, who had lost nearly half of her flowing water armor, quickly shook her head. "Better to absorb it from me."

"I can't use Mental Bite unless I'm human. I won't be able to withstand the next joint attack. Hurry!"

The face mask of the ever-calm Akira twisted up in agony behind the water. She brought the short blade stretching out from her gauntlet up to Mihaya's back as she leaned against her.

Black Vise raised the staff once more on the shoulder of the human-shaped devil. In sync with this movement, the Enemies also brandished their weapons and fists.

"Sorry, Myah," Akira murmured, about to put strength into her blade.

And then green light flashed from the supposedly deserted southern side of the plaza—in other words, from behind Black Vise—to envelop the layered avatar. A sound of resonance like a bell rang out, and the staff clutched in Vise's hand, the Arc, The Luminary, vanished without a trace.

"Hrng!" Vise grunted in surprise, and the human-shaped devil grabbed him with its massive hand. Mihaya thought it was trying to protect him from their attacks like it had a few minutes earlier, but that wasn't the case.

A roar full of rage ripped out of the devil's throat as it crushed the inky avatar with a single squeeze. The dozens of thin panels became thousands of fragments and scattered, and dull-black flames erupted from inside the fist. Those flames drooped down to the ground like a viscous fluid and turned white to produce a death marker the color of an elephant's tusk.

Stunned, Mihaya tried to guess what had happened. The reason the Devil-

class Enemy had been released from Vise's control was because The Luminary had vanished. The reason it vanished was because it had been hit with a green light. And there was no mistaking that light.

Citron Call, the special attack of Nega Nebulus's Watch Witch, Lime Bell. And it hadn't been the mode that rewinds the time of the target, but rather Mode II, which rewinds status changes in a duel avatar. The Arc that Vise had was probably transferred to him by the White King, but Lime Bell had made it as though that transfer never happened.

Opening up her leopard vision all the way, Mihaya stared south of the Sengakuji plaza. The small silhouette in the pointed hat brandishing a bell-type Enhanced Armament was definitely Lime Bell. And beside her was a death marker, although it was unclear to whom it belonged. Most likely, whoever it was had used up all their power carrying Lime Bell to that position in Black Vise's blind spot, taking thorn damage all the while. Thanks to their efforts, their most powerful enemy, Black Vise/Ivory Tower, had temporarily left the battlefield.

But it was still hard to say that this turned the battle situation in their favor. Freed from the rule of the Arc, The Luminary—or out from under its control, the devils would rampage even more wildly and come to attack Mihaya and her comrades. On top of that, there were still ten members of Oscillatory remaining, including Fairy and Behemoth.

“Everyone, hang on a little longer! We'll focus our attacks on one of them and create a way out!!” The Black King quickly called out. “Overdrive! Mode Red!!”

The parting lines that shone green changed to a ruby red. With the pain racking her entire body finally weakening, Mihaya also pulled free of Akira's arms and braced herself firmly on the chocolate ground.

The ten Devil-class Enemies once again targeted Nega Nebulus and howled fiercely, their massive bodies shaking.

“Aaaaaaah!” Black Lotus's battle cry was on par with that of the devils, as a blue overlay reminiscent of a super-hot star gushed from her arms.

Even Mihaya, now a member of the Black King's Legion, couldn't help but feel a shiver of fear at the purity and intensity of that light. She couldn't even begin

to imagine exactly how much training was required to polish a technique to such an extent without falling to the dark side of the Incarnate System. Incarnate techniques didn't normally work very well on Enemies, but the strength of her imagination was enough to easily pierce such resistance.

Mihaya thought that they might really be able to take down just one Devil class at least. But at the same time, she also understood painfully well that not all of them would make it out. Even if they did break out of the circle of devils, an endless damage zone and ten veterans, including two of the Seven Dwarves, awaited them. Encamped as they were in safety zones inside buildings, they far and away had the advantage in a group battle. Not to mention, the cockpit block of Invincible could no longer move and simply sat next to Mihaya and the others. Most likely, Niko intended to provide cover for their retreat with her last weapon, four automatic guns. But Mihaya couldn't leave her behind. There was no way.

First, though, they had to defeat the devil before them. If even half the group could get away, they would still have a thread of hope. She lifted her battered body to scrape together the last of her strength.

And then she heard that voice from the sky once more, the voice that had changed the Territories stage to the Unlimited Neutral Field and the Demon City to the Hell stage.

“Paradigm Restoration.”

Ice claws digging into her heart, Mihaya looked up. Beneath the swirling purple clouds, an F-type duel avatar floated, wrapped in a faint-pink light. But she wasn't flying under her own power. A silver avatar pressed up alongside her to hold her aloft with an arm. Platinum wings stretched out gracefully from his back, each one an arrangement of ten metallic fins shining with a light as if to purify the miasma of Hell.

“C,” Ardor Maiden said.

“Corvus,” Sky Raker murmured.

There was no mistake. It was the Black King's child, the lone duel avatar in the Accelerated World with the ability to fly, Silver Crow. If it were anyone else, this was the sort of thing that would make a person assume Crow had turned to the

White Legion. But Mihaya—and probably everyone else there—was certain the possibility of that was zero.

Pale-peach light poured down in a straight line from the staff in the F-type avatar's hand and spread out in a cylindrical aurora. Touched by this light, the Devil-class Enemies vanished without a sound as if they had only ever been illusions right from the start. And that wasn't all. The jet-black thorns covering the ground and the purple clouds embedded in the sky also disappeared, transforming into cold, flat, steel tiles and a dark-gray night sky. Hell had turned back into the Demon stage.

But no...*no*, that wasn't it. That wasn't *all*. The fact that the dawn's light had also vanished from the sky meant that this was no longer the Unlimited Neutral Field. The instant she came to this conclusion, Mihaya started to think about what she should do now. But the two kings were already moving.

“Starburst Stream!!”

The Black King called a fierce technique name Mihaya had never heard and swung her dual swords encased in a pale overlay ferociously one after the other, over and over. With each stroke, the light turned into a shooting star and raced off toward the eastern side of the plaza.

Meanwhile, the Red King leapt out of her half-destroyed cockpit block, crimson light shining in her fists.

“Radiant Burst!!”

Her arms flashed at a speed that was impossible for even Mihaya's leopard eyes to make out, firing the red aura like heavy artillery. The blue shooting stars and red bullets the two kings fired were swallowed up by one corner of the eastern side of the plaza, chasing after the quickly expanding aurora.

Here, Mihaya finally understood the kings' intent. The pink aurora generated by the F-type avatar in the sky above was opaque. She and her comrades couldn't see beyond the aurora to the other side, but that also meant that no one on the outside could see them, either. In other words, if they launched long-distance attacks to chase after the aurora, the members of Oscillatory Universe on the outside would have no way of perceiving them before they hit.

Shining with a pale-peach light, the aurora passed the large building on the east side of the plaza and turned it back into its normal Territories stage form. Ten Burst Linkers were in the open area on the first floor, trying to catch the final moments of Nega Nebulus. Snow Fairy, still standing on top of Glacier Behemoth's head, was about to shout out. But she was too late.

The Incarnate techniques, launched by two level niners with everything they had, hit the ten square on. An impact wave rippled the earth and pushed back toward them, causing Mihaya to unconsciously brace herself.

Blue and red light merged, expanded, and swallowed up the ten silhouettes before transforming into an incredibly massive spiral of exploding light to eliminate the members of the enemy Legion along with the ostensibly indestructible building of the Demon City stage. The light shot up higher and higher until it reached the dark sky and evaporated the thick clouds before finally weakening.

The ten health gauges that had popped up in the right side of Mihaya's field of view, including those of Snow Fairy and Glacier Behemoth, dropped all at once and disappeared.



Haruyuki keenly understood that his own instantaneous power of thought, which he had taken up as an issue lately, absolutely didn't begin to compare with that of Kuroyukihime and Niko. They couldn't have predicted that Orchid Oracle would appear in the sky with him and return the Unlimited Neutral Field to the Territories with a second forced Change. Thus, he'd intended to land once the Change was complete and explain the situation to everyone before taking on the challenge of the final battle with Oscillatory Universe.

To start with, Haruyuki hadn't even known that Kuroyukihime and Niko were taking part in this fight. When he'd flown from the northern tower to Sengakuji and discovered Black Lotus and part of Invincible on the ground among his comrades, he'd been so stunned he nearly dropped out of the sky. Pushing back the desire to go to Kuroyukihime's side that very moment, he stayed in the air to wait for the Change to end.

But the two kings entered attack formation a few seconds after the aurora

started to spread out and annihilated Snow Fairy and her team with an unavoidable Incarnate attack immediately after they shifted back to the Territories stage. That power of judgment and ability to act couldn't be explained away with just battle experience.

Most likely, the fact that they were even in the stage at all was the result of their preeminent thinking abilities. He wouldn't know until he heard the details, but for some reason, they had realized that this was a White Legion trap and had come chasing after the bus they'd only just disembarked from. If Kuroyukihime and Niko hadn't been there, they probably wouldn't have been able to withstand the powerful attack of the Devil-class Enemies.

The members of Nega Nebulus standing together below him were seriously injured, and Cassis Moose and Ash Roller weren't even there. Looking to the south, he found Lime Bell alone, leaning against the wall of a building. Trilead had carried her there, so he'd no doubt exhausted his strength on the thorn damage. If this were the Unlimited Neutral Field, there would have been a marker, but they'd returned to the Territories stage, so he'd left the stage, per the rules.

On top of that, he couldn't spot any sign of the Archangel Metatron, even though she'd gone ahead of them from the Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth. Haruyuki had seen the white flames of Trisagion pouring down from the heavens, so he was certain she had made it to the battle. But there was no way she would've remained undamaged by the Hell stage that appeared immediately after that. Had she gone back to Shiba Park to avoid its effect? Or...

Racked by anxiety and impatience, he continued to hover until, finally, the aurora reached the wall two kilometers away and vanished. He was about to hurriedly return to the northern tower when Orchid Oracle looked back, hanging from his right arm, and spread her hand out to grab his mirrored goggles.

"Hey, Arita."

"Huh...? Wh-what?"

"Why is Kuroyuki here?! Did you actually make her take part in the Territories?! There was a nonzero possibility that the White King would have

been on the defending team, though!!” Her scold held a firm note, quite fitting for a member of the student council, and all he could do was shake his head, his face still in her hand.

“Y-you’re wrong. In the plan, Kuroyukihime and N—the Red King were supposed to defend Suginami. I only just realized she’s here, too. I’m totally shocked. But if they hadn’t been here, I feel like we wouldn’t have survived the Enemies’ attack.”

“...That’s true. But honestly, Kuroyuki, you...” Megumi let out a sigh and let go of Haruyuki’s face before clenching her jaw with readiness and resolve. “Arita, bring me down where they are.”

Haruyuki glanced at the ground before asking, “But, Wakamiya, for the members of Nega Nebulus...”

You changed the Territories stage to the Unlimited Neutral Field and pushed the Legion up against the brink of extinction. In a certain sense, you’re an even greater enemy than Snow Fairy and Ivory Tower.

Haruyuki couldn’t give voice to these words, but Megumi seemed to understand. She smiled faintly.

She nodded and added in a small voice, “But quit with the ‘Wakamiya’ in front of everyone else.”

“I’d also ask that you refrain from calling me Arita,” Haruyuki replied, then vibrated his wings to drop straight down.

Before his feet even touched the steel ground, his comrades were racing over. But when they saw Orchid Oracle in his arms, they stopped, with looks of doubt mixed with wariness.

He knew he had to explain it all to them, but he couldn’t hold on a second longer. “Um, what happened to Metatron?!”

“Whoa, hold up there. *That’s* the first thing you say?” Niko said with a wry smile, then pointed a small hand toward the Invincible cockpit block lying on the ground a little ways off. “Angel girl’s in there.”

Before she was even finished speaking, Haruyuki had taken his arm off Orchid

and was running over to the cockpit. “Metatron!” He peered into the open hatch.

But the dank pilot’s seat was completely empty. A cold hand clutched his heart. Had she disappeared? Had she burned up her very existence with the full power of Trisagion like when she had helped Haruyuki at the Acceleration Research Society headquarters? He was about to call the Archangel’s name once more, and he took a deep breath of cold air with his virtual lungs.

But then a small spot of light grew on his left shoulder before flashing and taking shape as a pure-white 3-D icon.

“...Metatron...” He said the name in a trembling voice and was about to touch the icon when the small wings slapped at his hand.

“Honestly. If you’d so much as thought about it, you would’ve understood. This is no longer the Mean Level of your Unlimited Neutral Field, but the Low Level of your Territories stage, so I cannot materialize as a Being. And I won’t disappear over a thing like that. You’re a thousand years too young to even begin to worry about me, Servant.”

Although, in subjective time, they’d been apart less than an hour, he felt nostalgically fond of Metatron’s ever-lofty tone and heaved a sigh of relief. She was right; when he thought about it, it was obvious. The Devil-class Enemies had disappeared, so it was only natural that Metatron’s true form would also be gone. To be more accurate, it was Haruyuki and his friends who had disappeared from the Unlimited Neutral Field. Once the mission was over, he would go and see Metatron’s true form once more, he resolved. Like that, he returned to his landing point among the others with the icon riding on his shoulder.

When he saw them up close, his companions’ avatars, having made it through a terrible battle, were without exception in a terrible state. Armor was cracked and shattered, and more than a few were missing parts. All that remained of Olive Grab was his head in Bush Utan’s hands, and it was a mystery as to how he was even alive in that state. Haruyuki wanted to run over to them and apologize for having fled from Snow Fairy’s Brinicle and sing the praises of their incredible fighting skill. But the air was still hard and strained; even now that

the battle was over, he felt slightly rebuffed.

Black Lotus and Orchid Oracle were facing each other a little ways off from the rest of the group. As they stared wordlessly, a storm of passionate emotion spilled over such that Haruyuki could even feel it, a wall to keep him from calling out to them.

Glancing up at the restored timer, he saw that there were still over a thousand seconds remaining in the Territories. It had probably gone back to the point in time when Oracle shifted the stage, but it was too long a period for them to simply wait for time to be up. Clenching his fists, he stared at the Black King's face mask. Beneath her cracked goggles, her bluish-purple eye lenses shone quietly. Most likely, Kuroyukihime had also already come to the realization that Oracle was Megumi Wakamiya.

As Legion Master, she was not allowed to respond with self-interest to Orchid, a member of the Legion who had just tried to round up all *her* Legion members and drive them to total point loss. But on the other hand, Megumi was Kuroyukihime's best friend. And she had lost her memories as a Burst Linker while she was a student at Umesato. Once her memories of her parent Saffron Blossom had returned, and she had been offered the possibility of her recovery, Haruyuki didn't think she could have done anything other than obey the White King. But Megumi would have to explain that to Kuroyukihime herself.

Why didn't you say something, Wakamiya?!

Perhaps this thought of Haruyuki's reached her; Megumi called out to Kuroyukihime for the first time. "Black Lotus." But the words that followed were nothing like what Haruyuki had expected. "Kill me. When you do, these Territories will end in your victory."

The tips of Black Lotus's battered blades twitched. Kuroyukihime's conflict came through to him painfully clearly, and he clenched his fists even tighter. At the moment, the only remaining member of the White Legion was Orchid. It was true that if she was defeated, the Territories would end, but could he actually say that this was the best option here?

In the total silence, only the numbers on the timer dropped slowly.

When these hit one thousand, Niko spread her hands. “I dunno what the sitch is, but the two of you are still alive and all, so...First, you gotta talk it all out. Otherwise, there are things that just don’t get said, y’know? The rest of us’ll just go off somewhere else.” Whirling around, she turned to her comrades and clapped her hands loudly. “Hokay! We’re movin’, gang!”

“Wh-where, yo...?” Bush Utan asked, dumbfounded.

Niko snapped a finger out to the east. “At times like this, you gotta line up toward the sun and walk!”

“The night came back, though, y’know...”

“Shut up! See with your heart! C’mon! Move it! Move it!”

Sky Raker giggled and started walking at the head of the group. Aqua Current and Ardor Maiden followed her, and having joined up with the group again, Lime Bell chased after them with the rest of the Legion. After taking one final look at Kuroyukihime and Megumi, Haruyuki turned around.

“Honestly,” Metatron muttered. “The process of determining your intent is as inefficient as ever for you little warriors.”

He grinned wryly. “Sometimes, there are things more important than efficiency. I mean, Metatron, this time, you—” *You tossed logic out the window and came to help us, didn’t you?* He was about to continue, but for some reason, the Archangel apparently sensed this and whapped his helmet preemptively, so he gave it up.

The party continued to walk to the east, cutting across the crater produced by the Incarnate techniques of the two Kings. As he stared at the back of Niko up ahead, Haruyuki remembered her words.

First, you gotta talk it all out. Otherwise, there are things that just don’t get said, y’know?

As head of Prominence, Niko had judged her own parent Cherry Rook after he became the fifth Chrome Disaster. Maybe she saw their relationship in Black Lotus and Orchid Oracle.

Haruyuki didn’t know what kind of answer Kuroyukihime and Megumi would

come up with or if they'd be able to stay friends. But he thought it was definitely worthwhile for them to lay out all their feelings and have that clash. Once upon a time, Haruyuki had also created a wall between his childhood friends Takumu and Chiyuri, closed his mouth, and brushed away the hands that were offered to him. His encounter with Brain Burst had deepened that rupture and also healed it, but a regret that couldn't be completely wiped away still lingered in his heart.

The wounded Burst Linkers continued to walk aimlessly east in the Demon City stage with the night fog hanging in the air. They cut across the JR train line and slipped through Shibaura Central Park, and just as a large river came into view up ahead, a system message burned bright red before his eyes, announcing the end of the Territories and the victory of Nega Nebulus. The sixteen Burst Linkers stopped walking and looked up at the dark sky until they automatically departed the Accelerated World.

The dry sound of a motor and road noise. The sensation of slightly hard woven fabric of the seat beneath him. Golden sunlight coming in from behind.

For about two seconds after returning to the real world, Haruyuki didn't know where he was. He looked at the scene flowing by outside the window and finally remembered that he was inside an automatic, circular bus running along Meiji-dori.

Although the dive into the Accelerated World had been a succession of unexpected developments, they had only been fighting on the other side for an hour and a half at best, meaning that not even five seconds had passed in real time, but he felt as if it had been several days. Perhaps the other Legion members felt the same; for a while, no one moved to speak.

But when the bus stopped at a light, Fuko stood up. "So many things happened, but first and foremost, good job, everyone."

There were no other passengers on the bus, so she spoke to them in her physical voice as she looked at the party.

"We'll get off at the next stop and get on a bus going in the other direction. I'm sure there are many things we'd like to discuss, but let's save the details for a meeting after we get back to Suginami."

"Okaaaay," Chiyuri responded, before sitting up straighter next to Haruyuki, and looked around the bus. "Right. Kuroyukihime and Niko aren't on this bus."

True. Bush Utan and Olive Grab had dived from a separate location, so they weren't on the bus. Nor were Kuroyukihime and Niko, who had executed an unexpected entrance. But they were probably coming after the bus in a taxi or something, so they might meet up with them at the bus stop.

“Um, Master, I’m going to give Kuroyukihime a call,” Haruyuki said, manipulating his virtual desktop.

“No.” Fuko twisted around and shook her head. “I’ll do that. You have something else to do, Corvus.”

“Huh...What’s that?”

Instantly, everyone on the bus was sliding down in their seats in exasperation. *Gah, what was it again?* After thinking for a second, he finally remembered.

“Oh! Right! I have to get Coba-Manga to check the matching list!”

Yes, that was the objective of the day’s mission. Although they had come up against some twists and turns, the Territories had ended in Nega Nebulus’s victory. Which meant that, at the current moment, control of Minato Area No. 3 had shifted from Oscillatory Universe to Nega Nebulus, and Oscillatory no longer had the right to block the matching list.

If members of the Acceleration Research Society now showed up on the list, then it would be clear that the White Legion and the Society were one organization, two sides of the same coin. But the list confirmation had to come from some high-positioned third party. It had been members from the Blue Legion, Leonid, Dualis, Cobalt Blade, and Manganese Blade who had agreed to take on this important role. They were currently on standby at the Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum in the southern part of Minato Area No. 3 and would’ve quickly completed the confirmation.

With a suddenly cold hand, Haruyuki launched his call app and started a voice call to Cobalt Blade, aka Koto Takanouchi. He got through in about 0.3 seconds.

“Uh, um, this is Arita.” He pushed out a hoarse voice from his desert-dry throat. “K-K-K-K-Koto, how did it go?!”

“Before that!” Koto sounded excessively thorny, and Haruyuki unconsciously shrank into himself. *“Why did the Territories take more than five seconds?! Yuki and I had to accelerate so many times, you know!”*

“S-some stuff happened. I’ll explain everything later. S-s-s-so the matching list...”

The brief hesitation of her silence told him what was to come. *That can't be*, he thought.

"Unfortunately, none of the Acceleration Research Society member names that you indicated were on the matching list. You won't be able to expose the evil deeds of Oscillatory Universe with this."

His mind went blank, and he lost sight of what he should say. The victory they had fought so desperately for, that had left them all painfully battered and beaten, that had plunged the majority of the attack-team members into the very real danger of total point loss—it had all been for nothing. His brain couldn't accept this fact.

No. The truth was somewhere in his heart; he'd expected this. The White Legion had laid an elaborate trap, and they'd been waiting for Haruyuki and his comrades. In which case, it made sense that they would have made sure to evacuate Society members Rust Jigsaw and Sulfur Pot outside the area beforehand. But he'd felt like he wouldn't be able to keep fighting if he thought about that possibility, so he had desperately pushed it aside.

But he couldn't erase Koto's words. "I...see," he managed to reply somehow.

"The truth is, I shouldn't be saying this as an observer, but"—Koto lowered her voice—*"I actually think it's too bad myself. But there should still be another way. I'll be wishing Nega Nebulus success in battle."*

"...Thank you," Haruyuki murmured and then managed somehow to pull himself together. "Um, if you see Trilead at the museum, please tell him thank you. I'll call him, too, but he really did amazing work in there."

"Understood...Yuki says for you to keep fighting, too. All right, bye then."

The call was cut off there, and he let out a long breath before lifting his head.

Even as his comrades had already figured out what was coming, they turned their eyes on him wordlessly as if holding on to one last thread of hope. Not knowing how to respond to this, he simply shook his head silently.

Weighty disappointment and despair filled the bus, and Haruyuki hung his head once more. Chiyuri patted his back, but all he could do at the moment was nod slightly.

Their strategy of using the matching list to pull back the curtain on the Acceleration Research Society had been utterly defeated. Cobalt Blade said there had to be some other way, but it seemed like a frontal attack was now out of the question. The only method left to them was to enter the private Eternal Girls' Academy, Oscillatory Universe's headquarters, and challenge them to a final battle via the local net, he thought desperately.

“Um.”

Haruyuki looked in the direction of the voice. Shihoko Nago was holding up a small hand next to a teary-eyed Rin Kusakabe.

All eyes focused on her, and Shihoko slowly started to lower her hand, shyly, but then she bit down hard on her lip, took a deep breath, and continued. “Um, I don't know if this would be proof or not, but...”

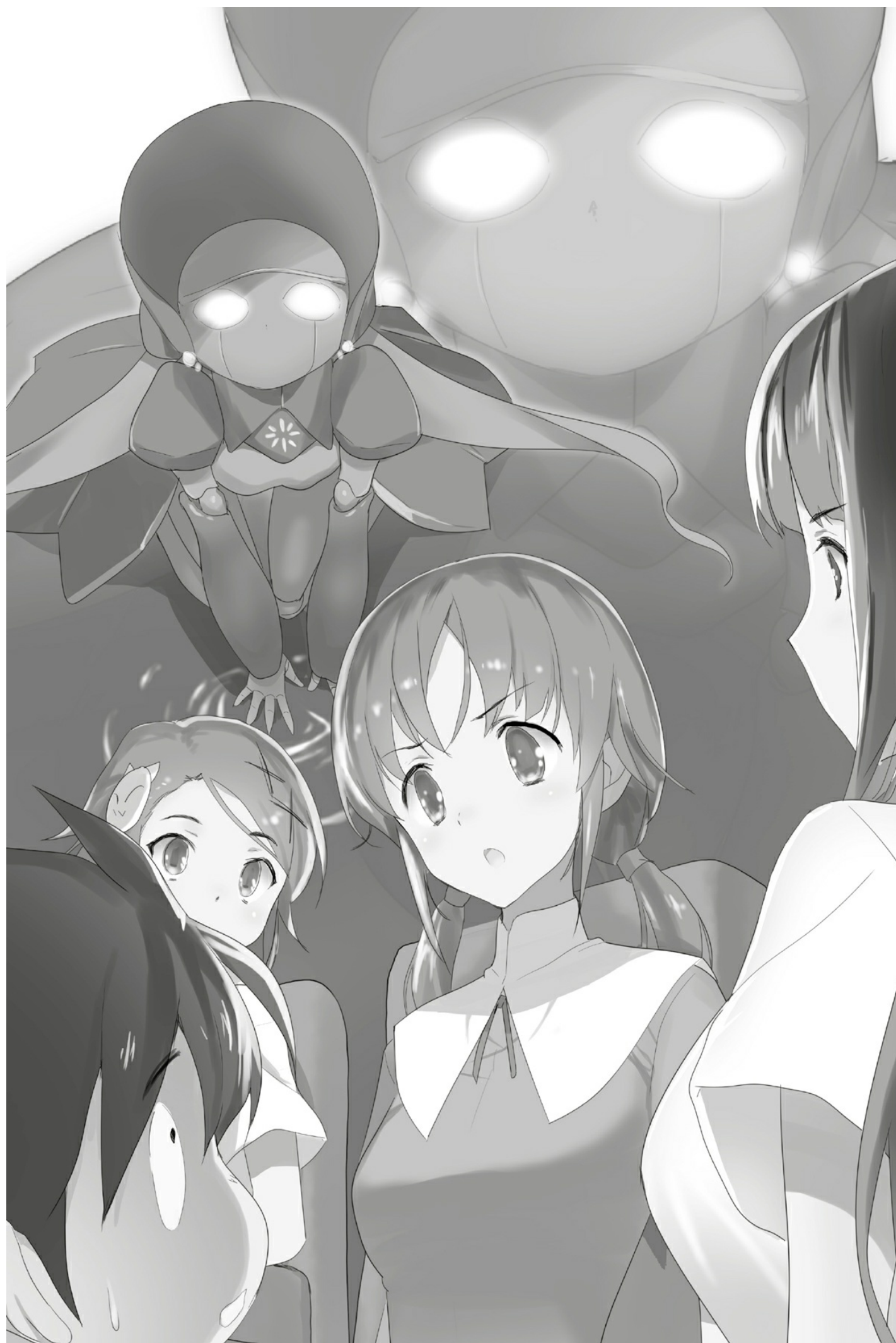
“Go on and tell us, Choco,” Fuko urged her. “We'd like any bit of hope at the moment.”

“Okay.” She nodded firmly. “Well...When we were surrounded by devils and everything looked hopeless and I could only just stand there and be protected and not do anything...I thought at least...I wanted to at least keep the memory of the battle for everyone...”

Chiyuri's hand was still on Haruyuki's back, and now it suddenly clutched his flesh together with the fabric of his shirt. But what Shihoko said next blew even that pain away.

“I recorded it on a replay card. Ivory Tower's transformation into Black Vise. Is that...? Would that be proof?”

To be continued.



AFTERWORD

I'm terribly sorry for the long wait. I bring you now *Accel World 21: The Snow Sprite*.

This book was scheduled for release in October, but that was postponed to December, for which I would like to offer my most sincere apologies once more. The delay was because the story for the theatrical release of the new anime *Infinite Burst* and the story for the Blu-ray/DVD ended up being longer than I anticipated, and I realize that it is really about time for me to acquire the ability to finish a story in the number of pages planned.

Now then, once again about this volume...(Warning for spoilers ahead.) The Territories with the White Legion, first of all, were settled as planned, and I breathed a sigh of relief. (LOL) Well, this definitely doesn't mean that the fight is now over, but rather than going forward, we will finally be charging into the fundamental final battle...Or so it would seem, but for the next volume, I have planned a story that's a little bit of a breather in the real world. It is Haruyuki's long-awaited summer break, after all!

When I think about it, I realize I haven't really written any true summer stories in *Accel* or *SAO*. As you well know, *Accel* started in the fall, and now we are finally reaching the summer, and most of the episodes in *SAO* are also from fall to spring. It's not as though I am consciously trying to avoid summer, however. I think the true summer story will continue in *Accel* for a while, so I'd like to remember the summers that have passed in the real world (for the author) as I write. And while I sit here talking, it will be next summer soon enough...

Now, then! I mentioned the movie at the beginning, but it seems that many

people came to see *Infinite Burst*, and so I must thank you! In the film itself, in order to pack the movie with scenes that we felt fans of the original work would want to see, we didn't get to dig too deep into the new characters of Risa and Nyx, but you could supplement it with the special stories "Leap to Infinity" and "Return to Eternity"...Something like that. Also, as a new development on the game front, the title *Accel World vs. Sword Art Online: Millennium Twilight* was released, and just as the name suggests, it is a crossover between *Accel* and *SAO*. I got goose bumps watching the cut scene of Kirito and Crow flying together. They kindly allowed me to give them the foundation of the story, and it is still a story that steps into *Accel*, so please do look forward to it!

In this volume as well, I just barely, barely made progress despite the extension, causing trouble once more for illustrator HIMA and my editor, Miki. And I apologize to all of you readers, too, who were looking forward to the new volume! I'd like to deliver the next one to you as soon as possible!

Reki Kawahara

On a certain day in November 2016

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